

THE
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PELLEY

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THE
BLUE LAMP
WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY



AUTHOR OF - FOG - THE DRAG -

THE BLUE LAMP

By WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY

Author of "Fog," "The Drag," etc.

A quiet, peaceful, sleepy Vermont hamlet was startled suddenly to find weird lights, shadowy figures, and strange noises appearing in and about the Harmon mansion, the family seat of the wealthy, aristocratic old Harmon family.

Mary Harmon, heiress to this vast estate, disappeared mysteriously some twenty years before. The authorities and newspapers seize on the unusual activities about the old house for an investigation.

A titled nobleman once engaged to the missing heiress comes back from abroad. The girl's family physician, also in love with his charge, returns from the grave.

These and others come together, along with a shadowy old woman and a beautiful young girl, as William Dudley Pelley weaves and interweaves motives throughout the plot of the story, with the same masterly touch he used in "Fog."

BLACK

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MARY HARMON VANISHES

CHAPTER ONE

THE first Vermonter to discern weird and perturbing phenomena about the abandoned Harmon premises was an elderly eccentric named Jacob Gleason. He lived on a back road between Paris and Wickford.

Jacob had driven into town one pleasant autumn afternoon to consult with Squire Butterworth regarding an incubator patent. His phlegmatic white mare had clopped over the East Main Street bridge at sunset; he had tied her near the depot, secured his supper in Farrell's Quick Lunch and met the attorney at a quarter after seven. An hour and a half they were closeted together. When the gray-bearded inventor descended the steel-treaded stairs in the Citizen's Bank block, he went diagonally across to the Olympic movie theatre, as was his wont. It was a quarter to

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eleven when the patient mare was at last headed homeward. The illuminated courthouse clock struck eleven mellow strokes as the rig left the Paris street lamps behind and skirted the bog lands across the river, colloquially known as the Flats.

Autumn had come early in the mountains that year; most of the leaves had already fallen. Goldenrod and milkweed grew along the waysides, and the night air was spicy with sumac and spruce. A vast coral moon had risen above Haystack Mountain. As it mounted the heavens it became cold silver.

So bright was the moonshine that old Jacob noticed it. "Golly!" he muttered. "It's almost light as day."

Reaching the hilltop, where the mare paused for breath, Gleason could see the Cogswell farm, the Wheeler place, even the grist mill in Merritt's Hollow. Spruce beyond the Wheeler cornfield, where the harvest stood in shocks, reflected that sharp lunar brilliance

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till their uppermost boughs seemed crusted with silver. Strangest of all, he could likewise see it glinting on the slate-covered gables of the Harmon property across the slope down in Echo Fork.

In all the time between crossing the bridge and guiding the mare down the grade toward the Fork, the inventor turned out for one vehicle only. Just before passing District Three schoolhouse the powerful headlights of an oncoming motor car savagely blinded the man in the buggy. He turned into the gutter to permit it to pass. He had a confused sense of a mighty limousine purring past him, but was concerned at the moment in keeping his vehicle from upsetting. Then the red eye of a tail lamp vanished behind him. He clucked to the mare and a maple grove hid them.

Down toward the Fork the mare scuffed in the dust, swishing her tail as the reins struck her rump. The whiffletree creaked musically; the slack of the harness tugs slapped on the

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shafts. Now and then the buggy's steel tires hit a sand-buried stone, and a spark would be fired at the contact with flint. Jacob grew drowsy. He slouched in the seat. The mare knew the road, and he gave her the bridle.

On the southern edge of a wooded hill, before the Harmon place was reached, the road swung a curve through a long aisle of trees. In summer their boughs made an overhead bower. Though the leaves had fallen now, and despite the brilliant moonlight, the sensation of driving through a tunnel visited nocturnal travellers and suggested a stretch to be hurried through quickly. The whole district, in fact, was scarcely to be tarried in. The high-road was narrow. To the left and right were spaces of brush, with spilled stone walls that marked off the woods. Also a quarter mile further on, when these woods at length ended, the moonlight shone brightly in Echo Fork itself.

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And facing the Fork was that eerie brick house!

Passing through this tunnel meant nothing to the mare. She jogged mechanically, eyes half-closed and heavy ears flapping. Old Jake was vaguely aware of their progress; he swayed in the seat with his beard on his vest.

But halfway through the tunnel a startling thing happened. The mare's ears stopped flapping. Her eyes came wide open. With a halt and a snort her forward legs stiffened. Jake was aroused by the buggy's wild lurch. Again the mare snorted. Then the buggy went backward.

"Whoa! *Whoa!*" Jacob cackled. "What th' devil ails ye, y' durned ol' fool?"

The mare gave another leap, stopped, snorted again and seemed to quiver in terror. Ears like steel shells were pointed to the right. Old Jacob peered.

His mouth sagged open.

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Ahead, close to the bushes, something dark, sinister, wraithlike, was moving toward the Fork. In the same direction as themselves. At a steady, floating pace. There was just enough light to discern it, but the stretch was too dark to reveal its identity.

It would float a few rods, then halt and waver. Then another few rods and more queer uncertainty. No noise that Gleason could perceive accompanied this phenomenon, but the old man's hearing was not of the best and the crunching of gravel would scarcely have reached him.

"Hello, ahead thar!" he ventured. "Who is it?"

Instead of responding, the black *thing* got into action. The mare watched it tensely, her rubber-like nostrils quivering.

Jacob had the fright of his life. In and out through mottled patches of moonshine and shadow the apparition wended, paying not the slightest attention to the rig overtaking it. It

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had gone a hundred yards when the old mare's terror lessened. She moved along slowly. But, drawing close to *it* once more, again she stopped and snorted.

This time, with a quiver of fright down his aged back, Jacob saw black, trailing, voluminous draperies about the figure.

"By heck, *it's a woman!*" the old man exclaimed. "It looks like a nun."

But why should a sister, in the funereal robes of her caste, be off in these mountains with the hour nearly midnight?

Spasmodically, however, their progress continued. The phantom moved forward. So did the mare. Two more times Jacob hailed it. Yet he got no response. Not until the Harmon property appeared at the tunnel's eastern end did a legend of the district occur to old Gleason and sap such strength as remained in that moment. If the phantom had anything to do with the abandoned Harmon property, its one-time identity might startle the nation. . . .

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Several years bygone—old Jacob Gleason had forgotten how many—a New York banker had visited Vermont and selected that spot in the mountains for a summer place. Paris people soon realized that out by the Fork a house was going up. It was more than a house, that structure at the Fork. To the farmers roundabout it appeared as a mansion.

Built solidly of brick, set back from the highroad, with a campanile in front and a broad side veranda, it became a district show place; persons who knew John Harmon, its owner, and who were fortunate enough to gain entrance after its completion, spoke awesomely of its appointments and told stories of its furnishings.

The banker's health was poor, however, which accounted for a residence up in the mountains. He was likewise a widower. An only daughter, Mary Harmon, who had not married until then because of her devotion to her father, lived with him in the mansion two

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seasons and made many friends by her beauty and generosity. Local rumor had it that when her father passed onward an enormous fortune would accrue to her. But she was plain-mannered, unassuming, and far more interested in clumsy local charities than in displaying her affluence or exhibiting snobbery.

Toward the close of the second year of their seasonal occupancy an aristocratic stranger arrived as a house guest. Middle Vermont was electrified to learn that the tall, svelte, cold-faced visitor was known as Count Briskow; that living among them was a Hungarian noble who evidently expected to marry the heiress.

But he came only once, for the next year John died.

Mary Harmon sent up servants who closed the house, without, however, altering its appointments or disturbing in the slightest the furnishings or fixtures. When the girl wrote, making permanent arrangements with Squire

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Butterworth to represent her locally and act as official caretaker for the premises, she declared she expected to utilize the house on her return from Europe after her marriage; meanwhile she wanted everything to remain as her father's whim had provided. It had been the ambition of a life of hard struggle, and she meant to keep it, to remind her of her parent, precisely as he had left it.

But Mary Harmon never went to Europe. And neither did she marry.

She vanished.

The father was no sooner buried, his will probated, an estate of nearly five million dollars turned over to his daughter as his only heir, when Mary Harmon disappeared one evening between sunset and sunrise.

THE THIRD ITEM

CHAPTER TWO

ACCORDING to the yellow journals, which kept the sensation alive for a month and a day, she went one evening to attend a little private dinner with her titled fiancé in the apartment of a struggling young medical student in Boston. Little or nothing was known of this student except that he had been graduated from a Boston medical college and was pursuing some private experiments under a bad financial handicap. Count Briskow had met him, had become interested in his work, and had introduced him to Miss Harmon. She too, according to report among her friends prior to her disappearance, had been impressed with the young man's zeal and had even suggested endowing a laboratory for him wherein he might carry out a wider range of experiments in the field of bacteriology.

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Twenty-four hours after coming home from the dinner Mary Harmon had complained of an unexplainable lethargy growing upon her. During the night immediately after the affair a growing nausea had first been attributed to the wine she had drunk; when this nausea became worse, poison was feared. Count Briskow promptly volunteered the information that he had been responsible for the presence of the wine, and a half bottle still remaining in the studio laboratory was recovered and analyzed. No poison was found.

The next night after the dramatic dinner, Mary Harmon was missed from her Beacon Street home. Servants declared that during the supper hour Count Briskow visited her, was closeted with her for nearly an hour despite her indisposition, and that during his visit the heiress put in a telephone call for young Dr. Hawkins, the suspected medical student. Dr. Hawkins arrived at the house and went

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upstairs, where sounds as of quarreling were heard between the two men. Briskow came down first and banged out the front door, snatching his hat from the hand of a servant and muttering angrily as he strode down the steps.

This servant immediately joined two others in the rear of the downstairs premises, knowing that if their mistress desired them the ringing of a buzzer bell would produce them.

Up until then no trained nurse had been called in, owing to the mysterious nature of Miss Harmon's malady and lack of knowledge as to its seriousness. The attending physician had decided that if the heiress did not improve by next morning he might order her to a hospital for observation.

When the evening hours began to pass with no buzzer call from the sickroom, the housekeeper finally went up to investigate. The chamber was in darkness. The bed was empty. There was no sign of Hawkins, Mary Har-

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mon or anyone. Nor had any message been left for the housekeeper.

Puzzled, not a little worried, thinking that perchance their mistress had gone somewhere with Dr. Hawkins for medical examination or treatment, the servants did not report the disappearance that night. But when morning brought no word of her, and when Briskow reappeared and learned what had occurred, Boston and New England—in fact the entire eastern United States—had a high-powered mystery for its evening teacups. According to the Count, Miss Harmon had been abducted, but what made him think so he refused to disclose.

There was no denying the sincerity of Briskow's upset. The foreigner was beside himself with wrath and perturbation. At once he led the police—and a corps of private detectives personally retained—to Dr. Hawkins' rooms.

They were stripped naked of every portable possession, including many scientific instru-

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ments which the Count's money had provided. The condition of drawers, chests and shelves disclosed the frenzied departure the young doctor had made. Even letters and papers which might give a clue to his identity and history were significantly missing.

The man had gone, and Mary Harmon with him. That, at least, was the public assumption.

But at once the yellow newspapers began to ask questions. First and foremost, Mary Harmon had been worth five million dollars. No attempt had been made to draw upon this money, not even her active bank account.

Second, it was unreasonable to suppose that a girl worth five millions, with little or no money on her that could be accounted for, would arise from a sick bed and run away with a poor medical student she had met but twice in her life, and both of those times within the past week.

Third, if she had suddenly become

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enamored of him and wanted to marry him, there was absolutely no necessity for an elopement; she was accountable for her behavior to no one; the Count, under rigorous questioning, admitted that no formal engagement existed between them; she was not the type to commit a prank so romantic, and certainly if she had left of her own accord she would have communicated with servants and her attorneys about the disposition of her affairs in her absence.

The mystery was further complicated by Count Briskow's behavior under cross-examination. Although his anxiety was grievous, he steadfastly refused to divulge what he had quarreled with Hawkins about on the evening he had banged from the house. He contended that to reveal it would be to violate a confidence in which he had no choice. It affected Miss Harmon's personal affairs, and his honor as a gentleman enforced his silence. "Did it have any bearing on motives for such a van-

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ishing?" he was asked. "Possibly but not probably," he had answered. Of one thing he was certain: young Dr. Hawkins had abducted the young woman and was secreting her somewhere for a nefarious purpose. What purpose? The Count refused to explain.

Yet an abduction against the young woman's will was something else. Wealthy heiresses dressed only in nightgowns and silken wraps are rarely removed forcibly from homes as publicly prominent as those along Beacon Street, Boston, in the early summer evening, with servants unconsciously guarding the rear and all manner of traffic passing in the streets. Carried downstairs against her will, she would certainly have attracted aid by screaming. If drugged, some sort of conveyance would have been required when once the street was reached. And in the publicity given the disappearance in the week ensuing, no cab driver could be found who reported carrying away

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a fare that answered the description of the missing heiress.

Newspaper men gradually perceived that Count Briskow's real upset was principally due to the fortune he stood to lose if the girl were not found. He grew increasingly distraught. A small army of crime operatives combed Boston and New England, all in his pay. They learned plenty about Hawkins, but nothing of Mary Harmon's whereabouts.

Dr. Euclid Hawkins was the only son of deceased parents in Ohio. His father, a reputable small-town physician, had left insurance on which the young man had scraped his way through medical school. The lad had always borne a good reputation during his boyhood; he had been grave-minded and boresomely studious during his college course. Not even a sweetheart could be found with whom he had ever been in love. Count Briskow had met him in the Boston Public Library originally; they had entered into casual conversation in

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the reference-room, where both were interested in poring over the same medical books. A visit by the Count to Hawkins' small attic laboratory had followed. And thence their friendship.

In all the information unearthed no clue was presented as to Mary Harmon's cause for flight willingly or Hawkins' expedient for transferring her to some hiding place unwillingly. And the heiress stayed hidden.

Newspapers ran riot in headlines. Vast numbers of reporters had their pay raised for unearthing trifles. Circulations jumped. From Boston to Chicago the greeting of friends was, "Have they found Mary Harmon yet?"

Learned criminologists came forward with theories. Alienists talked of romantic complexes. Sociologists were positive the young woman had been removed by some hoax played upon her and turned over to a life of shame. From Portland to Galveston came

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daily reports of strange women answering her description being seen in strange places.

In all the furor keen-brained newspaper editors noted only three salient items of bona fide significance bearing on the mystery.

The first of these was Count Briskow's reticence about the cause of his quarrel with Hawkins in the Beacon Street bedroom.

The second was the attitude of Mary Harmon's family attorney, one Ajax Hubbard, who was found to have made several mysterious out-of-town trips in the week following the "abduction," which he refused to explain, beyond admitting they concerned the Mary Harmon case and its ultimate solution. Lawyer Hubbard, however, subsequently died of a heart attack a minute or two after he had gone into conference with Briskow about the case. Briskow was exonerated from any connection with the death.

The third item concerned certain occur-

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rences which were now, two decades later, having a bearing on old Jacob Gleason's fright at the Fork in autumn moonlight with a phantom just ahead of him.

THE LIGHT AGAIN

CHAPTER THREE

FIVE nights after the disappearance of the Harmon girl from the Beacon Street house, and with all New England boiling in excitement, a woman named Pressey was driving into Paris, Vt., one evening when she was unnerved to behold what appeared to be a moving light in the Harmon summer residence, on the second floor. She reported this on her arrival in town, and a local sheriff named Crumpett promptly went out to the property with two deputies. Demanding admittance, they were confronted by a queer, bespectacled character with a hump on his back who gave his name as Wrightson and explained that Lawyer Hubbard had sent him up there to keep watch on the premises in the event that Mary Harmon returned, and to make certain alterations—cutting a door between two upper chambers—which the heiress

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herself had ordered a few days prior to her vanishing.

A quick telephone call to the attorney in Boston confirmed Wrightson's identity and presence and he was accepted as temporary guard and caretaker up to and some time beyond Lawyer Hubbard's demise. Wrightson hammered and sawed day after day alone in the mansion, and further occupied himself with digging a well in the rear of the premises which he later covered over with a roof.

These preparations for future occupancy of the property further convinced newspaper men that there was premeditation in Mary Harmon's disappearance and much behind the affair which was being held back from the public. They were scarcely prepared for the dénouement which came one night in the autumn, however, when the Harmon case was beginning to be forgotten.

Count Briskow had finally discharged his detectives and decided to return to Europe,

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the search a failure. He took a boat out of Boston bound for Liverpool—a vessel that first touched at Halifax, Nova Scotia. The ship was one night out of Halifax, and off the Newfoundland fishing banks, when the Hungarian fortune hunter was stupefied to glance up one of the decks and behold a person whom he took for young Hawkins.

Springing quickly forward before the suspect was aware, Briskow seized the fellow and taxed him with his identity. The man went stone white, broke from the nobleman's grasp, sprinted up the deck, hesitated but the fraction of a second, then climbed the railing and leaped overboard.

Instantly a shout was raised, the vessel was halted and boats were lowered, but the passenger was not recovered. And the long-lost girl had not been in his company.

Shortly after this development a Boston newspaper man named Joshua Battles—whose home-town was Wickford, a few miles above

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Paris—returned to his native state on a visit that was more than half an investigation of the Harmon mansion at the Fork.

Forcing an entrance into the structure from which the malformed watchman long since had departed, Battles made a spectacular discovery. Hanging in one of the upper closets, he found a man's coat of a size and pattern that convinced him it could never have belonged to John Harmon, Count Briskow or the crippled Wrightson.

The inside breast pocket revealed a letter—a stamped and addressed envelope, sealed, with Attorney Ajax Hubbard's name written upon the front—as though someone had pocketed the missive with the intention of mailing it and then forgotten both coat and contents.

Dear Mr. Hubbard:

Don't try any longer. By the time this reaches you I shall be dead. The spells are

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coming now with increasing frequency, and I am even in great distress to pen you this last word. I am convinced that Dr. Hawkins has done all he can. You too have been most obliging. To both of you I am grateful. Better that I go this way than the scandal attendant on placing the blame where it belongs and injuring innocent persons. And now good-by, dear Mr. Hubbard. Think of me as merely joining my beloved father.

MARY H.

Mary H.! The publicity attendant on the mystery had long ago disclosed that such was Mary Harmon's manner of signing most of her messages to employees and agents.

Battles lost no time in getting down to Boston with his find. The writing was quickly identified as Mary Harmon's. But where Mary Harmon had died—if she had—of what and under what circumstances, was fated to remain an enigma.

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One thing was certain: someone who had been in contact with the missing woman had likewise been in that house at the Fork and left a coat there with her last earthly word in it. Yet the house revealed nothing. Room by room it was gone over. Attic and basement were searched. No traces of the girl, other than this letter, were ever revealed. The door which Wrightson had cut between the two back chambers was there. The well in the rear yard was a well and nothing more—though it never held much water.

The Harmon fortune remained under the jurisdiction of the Boston trust company as John Harmon, the father, had formerly provided—until the daughter's body should furnish proof of her demise or the court rule as to legitimate claimants.

And twenty years had passed, with no one ever coming to live in the house at the Fork

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and no true explanation of Mary Harmon's fate ever coming to light.

Here, then, was Jacob Gleason, unable to coax his mare past a mysterious someone in feminine apparel who moved ahead in moonshine and refused to be addressed, heading steadfastly toward the structure which two decades bygone had figured as the pivot in one of the greatest unsolved mysteries which ever excited the readers of American newspapers. Could there be any connection between house and phantom? What else could Jacob think?

Out in the moonlight at the tunnel's end, however, the white mare lost her terror. The specter too seemed less anxious to flee. The passage had ended in a frowsy stretch of fence. The figure turned on reaching the gate. For the first time, apparently, it became aware of Jacob.

He heard a stifled cry.

The inventor of chicken brooders found himself torn between a mad urge to belabor

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his beast and get out of that district and an impulse to drive the rig closer for more intimate contact.

"Would you tell me," came a voice, "if this is the property where Mary Harmon died"?

Jacob's tongue had gone flaccid; he worked it with difficulty.

"It's th' Harmon place," he answered. "Nobody knows *where* Mary Harmon died."

"But it's the Harmon place?"

"Yeah, it's th' place."

"Thank you," said the figure—and headed inside the gate.

"Hey! Wait a minute! Who be you, anyhow?"

The old man's query started the echoes for which the Fork was celebrated, the mountain acoustics being mildly uncanny.

"I'm —after the body of my—my child."

Then, ectoplasm or no, as though it wanted less of old Jacob out in bright moonlight than

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it had in the tunnel, the strange shrouded figure moved into the yard.

She was after the body of her child!

Gleason sat glued to the seat of his buggy. He distinctly recalled that John Harmon had been a widower. If Mary Harmon had died in that house, after being brought up from Boston in some unexplainable manner, and this hooded figure was after the earthly remains of her offspring, what was Jacob gazing on but the shade of the long-missing heiress' mother? But twenty years after the girl's accepted death! What had delayed her ghostly errand till now?

Halfway to the veranda Jacob saw the phantom pause—assuming it was a phantom. Knee-deep amid grass which had not been cropped for a score of seasons, it appeared to scan the façade of the residence. It seemed to hesitate, to have small desire to enter that structure. With the same queer, wavy, floating

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movement, however—after a backward glance to learn if the man in the buggy still watched from the road—it covered the distance that brought it to the steps.

It mounted the steps. It dissolved in black shadow.

The house, as aforesaid, was constructed of red brick: a huge brick box with a campanile tower mounting up two stories in the center of the front and extending above the roof a sufficient distance to allow for four windows, one north, east, south, west. This roof was of so-called Mansard type, with a grilled iron fencing running around the cornices and a similar fencing enclosing the cupola about its summit. Skirting the lower southeast corner was a sizable veranda. It was high and deep, this gingerbread veranda. A riotous growth of unpruned woodbine enshrouded its pillars—blowsy, goiter-like bulges of wild vegetation—with a hole at the steps the only entering aperture.

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Whether the specter had a key to the place and went in the front door or passed around the corner for admittance on the east; or whether, forsooth, it bothered with no key but simply dissolved through panels and walls, was something old Jake was not prepared to answer. He only knew he awaited its appearance at entrance hole or windows and it came not.

He might have sat there ten minutes; he might have sat there two hours. But when he had finally clucked to the mare to move along and permit him a better view of the pile on the east, and had turned to watch developments, in one of the second-floor windows *he gradually discerned a light!*

Gradually discerned it, truly. For it did not shine with the sharpness of flame. It held a bluish, moldy, phosphorescent glow as from decaying viscous substances or reflection from a ceiling. It grew strong. It died down. It flared brighter. It vanished. . . .

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Devoutly Jake prayed that someone would come.

Human or superhuman, good or evil, angel or demon, *something* had entered the abandoned Harmon mansion. And all the accumulated deposits in the savings banks of Vermont could not have induced old Jacob to investigate that house and its entrant—not after seeing that light. It came a third time while he gaped, always from upstairs.

The silence in the Fork was terrific. Despite a slight deafness, the old man could faintly discern crickets cheeping down under the posts of the dilapidated fence. Once or twice the mare champed at her bit and cast nervous glances toward the house. No other sounds.

But presently, as he waited, Jacob heard another sound. And, without the chance of error, it came from that towering ark so gaunt beneath the moon.

He heard a cry—muffled by the walls.

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"*Mary!*" wailed a weird, lost voice. "*It's Mother! Where are you?*"

There was no mistaking that cry or the words. The mare heard them too. She turned her barrel-like head and stared, heavy ears raised and pointing toward the yard.

Down Jake's back, down his thighs, down his calves, oozed that awful prickling of nerves that comes from horror-curdled blood.

The ghost of the unnamed, unknown Mrs. Harmon must be stalking that neighborhood and house that night, seeking the daughter who had perished so mysteriously.

Jacob's nerve at length snapped. Remain there he could not. Not another moment.

The road directly before him carried straight through Foxboro Center to Hebron. The left-hand fork branched northward toward Wickford. Gleason chose the latter, and belabored the mare. Astounded by that sudden crazy clubbing, the mare gave a lunge that nearly broke the traces.

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As she loped up the grade the Vermonter glanced back. He watched the Harmon house as long as he could see it. And the light came again—in the upper northwest bedroom.

THE EMPTY TOOL HOUSE

CHAPTER FOUR

FRANK FOWLER and his younger brother Seba were the next two persons to behold the blue lights. Strangely enough, they saw them the same night as old Gleason.

The Fowler boys had been off hunting coons. On a stretch of deer bottom near the Wickford town line they had treed a fat animal and thence headed homeward. Planning to strike into the Paris highroad near the Fork, they came over the hill behind the Harmon house between three and four o'clock in the morning. Frank had the coon, the lantern and the ax. Seba had the rifles and three beagles on a leash. Topping the hill, they were about to weave a path down through sear, stunted spruces when the younger man halted and stared down the grade.

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"Frank!" he called softly. "Do you see what I see? Look!"

"See what? Where?"

"A light in the Harmon house! Frank, there's some sort of lamp being lighted in the cupola!"

The brothers drew together and peered through the boughs. Frank cried nervously:

"It's *blue*! What is it?"

"And why's it lighted up there at this hour of the morning?"

They waited, watching tensely.

"It's gone!" cried Seba, squatting down weakly.

"Someone took it away. Good Lord, Seba, do you s'pose it's a *haunt*?"

Frank likewise crouched down. The three beagles fretted.

"This place has been closed ever since we were kids. You remember the story about the missin' heiress?"

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"There it is again, Seba! The northwest window. Above the ell roof."

They saw the glow plainly between the shutters of the blinds. A moment it stayed, and then it died away. But again it reappeared in the room on the east.

"I've got a mind to bang off one of the guns," said Seba, "just to see what happens."

"No, keep quiet. Plenty may happen without us inviting it."

The glow died completely on the floor above stairs. Whereupon, in so far as the Fowlers could discern, the house had its customary aspect. Then Seba Fowler felt his brother clutch his arm.

"It's down cellar now. Look! The bulkhead's open under the kitchen in the back."

"Then whoever's got in there—"

"Seba, I can look straight into that basement. Move over this way. Ain't the cellar lightin' up?"

The hill dropped abruptly down into the

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yard. From their position in the spruces the Fowlers were directly above the gable of a tool house or vegetable cellar, one end of which was buried in an embankment. Straight in line with this gable the cellar's depth was visible. In it that eerie blue flame was now floating. One of the beagles started to yowl. . . .

"Stop it!" cried Frank. He cuffed the dog sharply.

But cuffing the dog did not keep it from growling. The other two beagles lifted their voices. Instantly, with this canine chorus resounding in the Fork, the glow in the basement was drowned in swift darkness.

"Seba—did—someone—blow it out?"

"I'd say so, yeah!"

"Look, Seba! My Gawd! *Somethin's risin' from out that cellar bulkhead!*"

Their hearts throttled down; Seba's nearly stopped. From that bulkhead's pit a wraith was coming out. It was whitish, vague, hesi-

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tant. It paused halfway out and stood searching the yard. Frank cackled softly:

"If that ain't a spook, then we'll never see another!"

"Shush! Let's see what it d-d-does. Frank, it's a woman. An old woman! Her hair's all white. Lord, oh, Lord!"

"That's not hair. It's some sort of veil."

The figure mounted higher. It moved out in the yard. There it stood for a time in ear-splitting silence, looking at the fixtures between ell and rear hill—two or three apple trees, a pile of old lumber, the roofed-over well which Wrightson had dug, a matted grape arbor, some weather-grayed crates.

Slowly from one to the other of these the "specter" finally floated, brushing rank grass that came to its knees. Once or twice more it paused, as though uncertain of direction. Then it drew near the tool house directly below. An instant later came the scrape of a door.

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"Frank, you know the story about this dratted place—?"

"Listen! That's a woman we've just seen. A human woman. No ghost could open doors. Have you got the nerve to go down and make sure?"

"I'd give ten bucks to know if that grass has been walked in. No ghost would leave tracks."

"Hark! What's *that*?"

"Sounded like she'd tipped over something in the tool house—or run against something and mebbe fallen down."

Tensely they waited for the spook to reappear. The minutes ticked away—three, four, five. . . .

"What the devil's become of her?" Frank cried at length.

"I say we go down. We've got guns and the dogs."

Frank laughed nervously. "A lot o' good these pups 'd be, trackin' down a ghost."

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"Thought you claimed it was a woman? Well, s'pose we tie em up. We can leave 'em here with the coon and the lantern."

No ghost recurring, they tied up the beagles. With the coon in a spruce tree, they picked up their guns and crept down the grade.

The back yard was choked with rank vegetation; gnarled pear and plum trees in addition to the apple, thick clumps of briers, frowsy lilacs, coarse rhubarb, wild mustard. But no more phantom or other signs of life. Seba faced his brother.

"Then she's still in the tool house!"

"Let's get in close. S'pose we call out."

They entered the yard, hearts bumping their ribs. Toward the tool house they ventured, guns held in readiness.

"Don't forget, Frank, that the humpback named Wrightson—"

Seba never finished. He fell over a tub.

In that instant, from the interior of the tool

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house, *the night stillness was shattered by a scream.*

It was high-pitched, long-drawn, horrible; the shack might have held a banshee in torture.

The Fowler boys froze. Frank dropped his gun.

The scream came again.

It lifted the hair, throttled the heart, curdled the blood.

Frank and Seba Fowler found themselves in action. They did not stand on the order of their going. Neither did they bother to return up the hill. Their sense of direction failed utterly to function. To get from those premises with swiftness and dispatch galvanized them madly and sent them leaping obstacles.

The chief of these obstacles was the fence along the road. Seba clutched his brother as they sprinted toward the "tunnel."

"Frank—the dogs—the coon—"

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"Devil take the dogs! They can't get away."

"But the coon—"

"The last thing I can use right now is a coon. *My Gawd, what a yell!*"

Not till the tunnel was behind them did the two slow for breath. Halfway up the grade they lighted cigarettes. Then eastward toward Paris they began walking briskly.

The first factory whistles were blowing as a puzzled and somewhat disgruntled attorney came down in a dressing gown to confront two Fowlers.

He was a tall, lank, grizzled old Vermont-er, Squire Butterworth, with moth-eaten hair and bushy gray eyebrows. A battered skull-cup was set on one temple. He heard the story with a scowl down his forehead.

"If it's any human woman," he declared sitting on the railing with his back against a post, "I can tell you right now she's there without my knowledge."

"We thought it was a human woman when

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we heard her open that door," Frank responded. "But after that yowl—!"

Squire Butterworth's wife appeared at the door.

"Jake Gleason is on the tellyphone," she announced to her husband. "Seems all crazed up 'bout seein' a ghost."

"A what?"

"At the Harmon place last night—at Echo Fork."

The three exchanged glances. So Jake had seen it too!

"You'd better come in and talk with him yourself. He's so plumb excited he's all tied in his tongue."

The squire went indoors and remained several minutes. When he came out his eyes showed concern.

"I'm goin' out there myself! You boys grab some breakfast and let me eat mine. Then hunt up Sheriff Crumpett. If you get anyone else to go along, mind they keep their traps

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shut. We don't want all Paris to be botherin' any woman who might prove she's got the right there."

The Fowlers found the sheriff opening Boland's cigar store. They likewise picked up Paul Lyman, local reporter on the Paris Daily Telegraph. Three-quarters of an hour later, in the Fowler flivver, they added the squire on their way out East Main Street.

Arriving at the Fork at a quarter after seven, they discovered Jacob Gleason; his shaggy white mare was tied by the gate, her tail swishing flies as she nibbled at the bushes.

"Th' back bulkhead's open!" old Jacob greeted them.

"We know it," answered Frank. "*She* came out of it last night."

"Let's look to the front doors first," Squire Butterworth suggested, averting a rehearsal of the Fowlers' experience. "If a lady's asleep on the premises, we shouldn't be takin' her too much by surprise."

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They entered the yard.

"You're caretaker, ain't you?" demanded Sheriff Crumpett. He too was grizzled and tall like the squire, but hewn in rougher mold, with the steepest shoulders and biggest Adam's apple of any native in middle Vermont. He had hands like claws and legs like treetrunks. Few in the valley had ever seen him hurry. Yet he knew his business and was no yokel constable.

"I'm considered so, Amos. No one's ever come to take the keys away from me."

"Who's kept up th' taxes?"

"Trust company at Boston sends a yearly check regular."

In a tense, nervous group they mounted the veranda. Sheriff Crumpett squinted thoughtfully.

"She couldn't have entered by either o' these doors: they're sealed with cobwebs an' old autumn leaves."

"I tell ye she went around back!" insisted

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Gleason. He was a person of importance this morning: vaguely the haunt was his personal possession. "She let herself in through th' cellar. That's why I didn't see just how she managed it."

"Well," proposed the squire diplomatically, "let's go in the front door regular, all the same, and sort of hello round."

The door that led in from the veranda on the eastern side was refractory, but at length it gave way. A sigh of stale air came out in their faces, a miasmatic odor that warned of decay. The sun of a glistening fall morning showed a mildewed side sitting-room all of whose appointments were draped with soiled sheeting. Dust covered everything. Some plaster had fallen.

"Helloo!" called the squire. "Anybody in this place? Helloo-oo! Helloo-oo-oo!"

They listened intently. The house remained silent.

The squire breathed raggedly, yet seemed

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to act relieved. "No one in sound of my voice, I take it."

"We're going to find her in the tool house," Frank Fowler muttered doggedly. "Come on, Sheriff Crumpett. Let's search this ark later."

"No, we're in here. Might as well look around."

They crossed the sitting-room, huddling together as the squire opened doors.

Sheriff Crumpett groped his way alternately into parlor and library. He ran up blotched shades, pounded refractory sashes till they lifted, opened brittle blinds. More light poured in, and cool, spicy air of the fresh autumn morning.

Then at once he stared at what the floors revealed.

Almost twenty years had coated them with dust. In this dust was a bedlam of *footprints*. They crossed and criss-crossed, led from door to door, out into the hall, from vestibule to stairs, from stairs to the kitchen and laundry

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in the ell. Wherever the nocturnal visitor had wandered, there her tracks were in evidence. She had plainly done much wandering.

"I guess you're right, boys," the attorney admitted. "A lady's been here, and she wasn't a ghost."

Paul Lyman voiced the general amazement:

"—And not only that, but she must have been barefoot!"

"Or else in her stocking feet," the sheriff qualified. "She could be in her stockings, and the fabric wouldn't show, not in dust such as this."

"Helloo!" called the squire again. "Anybody in this house? Helloo-oo-oo!"

But again no response reached the listening group.

Then started a careful search of the premises.

The kitchen revealed nothing but the foot treads; it was merely a kitchen. Upstairs,

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barring space for the hall, the house was divided into four equal quarters, each corner taken by a sizable bedroom.

Between the two bedrooms on the front, however, an additional short flight of stairs on the left led up in the campanile tower. An archway in which a dusty portière dangled partially screened this flight. The compartment at the top was uncarpeted and empty; even the windows wholly lacked shades.

Each of the chambers, however, was furnished. The beds were all made, though moths had chewed the counterpanes. Barring the dust, dirt and cobwebs, the structure was completely fitted for occupancy. Between the two bedrooms at the back the paper showed spoilage where a door had been cut, plainly the aperture effected by Wrightson.

"Well?" drawled the squire. He looked at the group.

Their failure thus far to apprehend an in-

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truder now made old Jacob an ally of the Fowlers.

"You gotta admit we seen somebody," he argued. "An' most likely we'll find her down in the tool house."

"All right. Let's go down there."

Crushed weeds about the door showed plainly enough where the tool house had recently been opened. The squire grasped the hasp and jerked the door open.

White faces peered in.

The outhouse was empty. Nothing met their gaze but a badly rusted wheelbarrow, a pair of ancient barrels, a portion of a door—a shed door apparently—that had been thrown in there flat and been buried by old leaves. The walls were half stone for three or four feet; they were coated with moss and greenish with mold.

"I'll grant you the house was entered," said the squire. "But, natural or supernatural, the visitor's departed."

JIMMY BATTLES

CHAPTER FIVE

OF a week in autumn when news throughout New England was woefully sparse, an obscure rural hamlet leaped into metropolitan notoriety. Paris, Vt., burst out on the front pages of great daily newspapers with a wham! The country seemed due for a resuscitation of the notorious Harmon disappearance, now a score of years old.

Was the person whom Jake Gleason had encountered Mary Harmon grown old? She would be about forty-eight in that current year, rewrite men calculated. And yet they always came back to her pronouncement to Jacob—that she was searching for the “body of her child.”

Wherefore it happened that a youth named Battles, son of the Joshua Battles who found the famous last letter of Mary Harmon, made

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his advent in the valley and promptly at his coming the mystery's aspect altered. For young James Battles met with an experience in the "haunted" premises beside which all others were as preface and prologue.

An agile lad in his twenties was Jimmy, with wavy brown hair and clean girlish jaw. Precociously wise in the ways of humankind, as he considered it behooved a militant young newspaper man to deport himself, trimly tailored, magnetic, aggressive, he crossed Boston Common of a morning in October, the day of his introduction to the mystery at the Fork, and got into Tremont Street.

With soft hat aslant over eager eyes, he reached a door in Summer Street and went whistling up worn stairs. An inimitable odor compounded of printer's ink, damp newsprint and paste permeated this building, and the lad breathed it deeply. He loved it, that smell. It was the physical exudation of a newspaper, epitomizing drama, exploration, excitement.

JIMMIE BATTLES

Down a length of upper corridor was a door with glass panels. In block letters on this glass the words were visible:

SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

Young Battles entered.

An office in the northeast corner of this Sunday Room, partitioned off with windows, bore the designation:

MR. QUIGLEY

A young man came from it and saw Jimmy Battles.

"About time you showed up!" he bawled across the desks. "Quig's been layin' duck eggs, waitin' for you to get here."

A bony, undersized man, with greenish eye shade aslant his forehead, took a cob from his teeth at James Battles' entrance. He had mothy grayed hair and a queerly flattened nose. A thousand wrinkles puckered his countenance, and the stubble on his jowls showed a

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faint awn of white. He worked in his shirt sleeves. His vest was unbuttoned.

"Jimmy," he demanded, "how much nerve have you got? Real nerve? To face down a good scare?"

The boy had helped old Cassius Quigley home on too many nights to stand in much awe of the pug-nosed Sunday editor. "Well, every six weeks or so I generally find the grit to survive your threats to fire me—"

"No wise-crackin', Jimmy. I'm serious this mornin'. Haven't I heard that you came from Vermont?"

"My folks lived there once, when I was a kid."

"Paris, wasn't it?"

"A little burg northeast of Paris, Wickford!"

"H'm!—I s'pose you were too young to recall much about the famous Harmon mystery some twenty years ago?"

JIMMY BATTLES

"Betcha life I recall it. Wasn't it my old man who found Mary Harmon's last letter?"

"Have you ever seen the Harmon place out at Echo Fork?"

"Yeah, I've been past it. My uncle, Sheriff Crumpett, pointed it out to me no later than last summer—"

"Sheriff Crumpett's your uncle?"

"Yeah, he's my mother's brother—or he was till she died—"

"What do you think about this so-called phantom who's appeared on the premises?"

"A lot of hokum. These haunts always are. Hunt down the rappings, and you find a loose shutter; run down the groans, and you bag some smart Aleck—"

"There's no rappings to this case or any groans either. A human woman, for some reason or other, has taken to stalking that abandoned summer place. I've got a hunch we haven't heard the last of the Harmon disappearance after all."

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"That old woman the incubator inventor saw couldn't have been a real ghost. Ghosts never leave footprints."

"I don't say it's a real ghost, nor a disembodied spirit." The editor set the horrible stuff in his pipe bowl afire and waved out the match. "But some woman's gotten into that ark and why she's around there has the vitals of a story."

"She might be anyone from escaped lunatic to bootlegger."

Quigley cogitated.

"Yeah, that's very possible. But no matter. There's a Sunday story in this too good to pass up. Jimmy, I want you to go to Paris. *I want you to sleep in that house—alone—till you've got the mystery solved.*"

The youngster jolted.

"Sleep there! *Alone?*"

"You don't imagine ghosts walk for a grand stand?"

"Who else has seen the ghost lately?"

JIMMIE BATTLES

"A man named Prouty, driving to Wickford one night in a flivver. Then a woman who took refuge on the porch to get shelter from a freak thunderstorm. At last Squire Butterworth saw her himself. He'd gone out there alone to tack up some signs."

"Where was she when the squire spotted her?"

"Climbing into the spruces on the hill behind the house. He dropped his No Trespass signs and took after her. But he lost her in the trees."

"Well," the lad laughed wryly, "I've gone up in airplanes for this Sabbath Fly-Swatter, and down in submarines. I've tried to solve murders and sat in at executions. I might as well end my brilliant career attempting to bag a she-ghost. Can I lug along a gun?"

"Yes, if you've got one. But be careful how you use it."

Twenty minutes later Jimmy Battles descended to Summer Street, sought out a pawn-

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shop and bought an automatic. He likewise bought cartridges and a strong pocket flashlight.

He caught the 10:15 train that left the North Station.

ALONE IN THE HOUSE

CHAPTER SIX

THE afterglow of the autumn day had given way to the first stars of evening when Jimmy Battles finally trod down into the Fork.

He saw the lugubrious silhouette of the Harmon campanile before he realized that his journey was ended. Descending the road, occasionally slipping on loose stones and gravel, he suddenly halted and stepped into the spruces.

Two men sat on the gate stone, their backs against posts. Enough light remained to disclose twin shotguns standing upright against the pickets.

"Watchmen, probably," the boy thought at once, "to keep the property from being torn to pieces. I'll have to gain entrance without either of them knowing. I hope there's no guard around in the rear."

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The contents of Jimmy's bag might have caused him some embarrassment had any mishap detained him en route. Besides linen and toilet accessories, it held a deadly automatic; an adjustable searchlight with extra bulbs and battery; a jimmy, once presented him by a convict burglar; a flask of water, and some sandwiches in tissue paper. Having reached the Fork without incident, however, he opened the bag in the screen of spruce.

He took out the gun, the flashlight and the jimmy. The first he shoved in his right-hand coat pocket. Hiding the bag, he tested the flashlight. Then, picking up the jimmy, he straightened to his feet.

Skirting northerly through the spruces, he crossed the Wickford highroad and reached a stone wall. Beyond this wall lay the yard behind the house. Vaulting over it, expecting every moment to be hailed or seized, he discerned the tool house built into the embankment, the wreckage of the arbor, the roof

ALONE IN THE HOUSE

above the well. Through the seclusion supplied by the hoary trees he skulked, briars ripping at his clothing like tiny steel fingers, till he gained the bulkhead.

A freshly painted sign had been nailed across the obliquely lying doors, severely warning trespassers.

He inserted the tip of his bar beneath the sign. His heart thumped raggedly as the few nails pulled out. Presently, the flash beam ready in one hand, he raised one door and looked into the pit.

A smell compounded of gravel, mortar, stonework and mold assailed his nostrils and almost made him reel. But he poked the flash beam down and followed it. It was a long, cylindrical flash with funnel-shaped lens; it threw a sharp ray for a full hundred feet.

Pulling the door close over his head as he descended, he found himself in a rotted void of black. The steps of the bulkhead—square

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billets of stone—were so thick with débris he could scarcely get a heel hold. On the cellar-floor level more of this débris wedged the basement door open. Battles stood listening. . . .

Water dripped somewhere. A rising night wind blew sear dead shrubs against the outer masonry. No other sounds.

Around the cellar he turned the light beam, taking good care to keep it from the windows.

All that basement was a catacomb of cobwebs; it must have contained an army of spiders—gigantic in size to spin webs so heavy. Never had Jimmy beheld spiders so thick or so hideous. They seemed to snarl, to interlace with one another, weaving ghastly screens before exhibits too inexpressibly gruesome for human eye to see.

It was a rank, foul, noxious place, and the boy edged through it as quickly as he dared.

Halfway up the kitchen stairs he paused. It took courage to continue.

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At the top of the flight a door stood ajar. But first, before reaching it, Jimmy had to smear cobwebs from wrists, face and head. Some of them tore audibly, like unspeakably rotted gauze, and clung to his clothing as though it had been glued.

"I wish I'd brought someone with me," he admitted.

A rusted sink with a copper pump was illumined by the flashlight. Its handle thrust out like the arm of a gallows. Other things he saw: a senile brick oven built out from the wall; a rusted range; a long yellow table. A shelf above the sink held lamps without chimneys. Two or three wooden chairs showed huge cracks in their seats.

But over everything was *dust*—dust and more cobwebs. It was hard to describe, that dust. It gave flat surfaces a feathery aspect.

The kitchen smelled sickishly of creosote.

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He had entered it from stairs that came up in the southeast corner. From a battery of doors leading into the body of the house, only one stood open. The apartment beyond had a cryptlike appearance.

As Battles moved toward it, and stood on the threshold of a cavernous dining-room, he felt that if occult phenomena were revealed too abruptly he would bolt, even if he took a window with him. The sallow windows were tall; twisted inner blinds were closed on most of them. Some held shades that had curled like wall paper.

He crept across the dining-room.

A vast spread of bilious linen had been draped over tables and chairs. A hanging lamp above had discolored this with droppings. An old-fashioned sideboard was barren of crockery; the dust on its top held a labyrinth of mice tracks. More chairs, and a china closet revealing empty shelves, were set back against the walls. Cobwebs spanned

ALONE IN THE HOUSE

all corners. In another corner an open door yawned.

This led into the side sitting-room. Presently he gained the central hall. Before him on the floors he saw footprints plainly.

He paused to listen.

So quiet it was that during a lull in the night wind he could hear the ticking of his wrist watch. Then the wind came anew, stronger, fitfully, leaves scudding before it, driven blindly in the dark. The veranda woodbine rattled like a rack of sleazy bones. Occasionally the house gave off queer noises. Night after night—spring, summer, autumn, winter—it had doubtless done the same.

Jimmy dared not point the flash directly toward the front. Assuredly those men by the gate would perceive it. Yet step by step he advanced down the hall. He wanted to learn if those watchers still kept vigil. He traveled a wide, high aisle bordered by sheeted divans and chairs.

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They resembled crouching phantoms. Framing the front door beyond the arched vestibule were narrow, vertical windows. Shutting off the flash, Jimmy rubbed a spot clean. He could see through the ribs of the woodbine outside.

The gate space was empty. Either those men had not been watchmen or they had seen his flash beam and might now be investigating. Perhaps they were hunters who had paused there to rest. If they were watchmen, he would soon hear them entering. They would find the sign on the bulkhead pried off. Doubtless that would bring them up through the house. He waited to see . . . three, four, five minutes. He heard no sounds as of watchmen coming in by the cellar or elsewhere. They must have been hunters.

And yet their presence had subconsciously supplied him with the surety of human assistance if Unspeakable Things came floating through those rooms. A horrible *abandonment*

ALONE IN THE HOUSE

struck to Jimmy's marrow. Acutely he realized that he was alone—gruesomely alone—with spiders—and ghouls in a house shut in by mountains. He knew that, with the long night before him, he must continue to search upstairs. Yet how could he do it? At last he was honest with himself.

He was **TERRIFIED!**

A GIRL—ALIVE

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WIND continued to blow in gusts. It swirled more leaves in the crannies of the broad veranda. Once an automobile hurtled past out front, swiftly, in the direction of Paris, as though its driver were running a gantlet. For an instant the boy felt the solace of his kind near at hand, and when that was gone the reaction was calamitous.

And then, as he sat there striving to scrape courage to move about once more—possibly climb upstairs—supersensitive auditory nerves caught a noise not made by the wind, the scurry of rats or the squeaking of mice. At first it confused him; then it sickened him.

Creakings he heard—a series of them—accompanied intermittently by hollow bumpings—and the house wasn't old enough to produce them normally.

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Somebody—or Something—was in that house with him!

As waves of horror swept over him he tried to decipher the exact type of the noises, the specific direction from which they were coming. Overhead, he thought them, and yet they did not drift down the stairs. The stairs were at the back. Too far away.

The boy strained every sense he possessed. Gradually he discerned that whatever was making the noises was engaged *in climbing the opposite wall and moving across the ceiling!*

But no illumination. The Stygian blackness persisted.

When the next bump came it sounded farther down the ceiling toward the stairs and kitchen.

Ten minutes ticked away. And Jimmy Battles moved not a muscle. The wind lifted and died. It moaned. It cavorted, carrying sear leaves with it. Jimmy's underclothing was

A GIRL—ALIVE

moist—a horrible dankness that must have come from horror. He tried to move, but his biceps were flaccid.

So a half-paralyzed boy in an empty world at that mountain fork sat counting his heart thumps and awaiting more phenomena.

Presently they came.

Stealthy, scuffling footfalls!

They sounded faintly; became louder; stopped for a time; died away altogether. . . . An interval of silence. Then they were repeated. Knocking thumps!—one-two-three—one-two-three-four—one-two—one-two-three!

Then something like a human voice sounded. A sort of exclamation!

Sixty seconds more ticked away.

Then Jimmy seemed to hear a soft steady squeaking as of rusted wheels turning, axles needing oil.

After that the climax came swiftly.

A heavy thud—a wild cry—an oath—all

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plainly from the stairs. Then down those stairs he heard Something coming.

Bolt Jimmy could not. He held his breath till his head grew giddy.

Bump!

The boy heard a frantic scraping—another bump—a wail—a series of bumps. Then a queer, sharp slap that was followed by a moan!

After that, quiet! Oceans of quiet. It shrieked at the eardrums.

Steeling his nerves the boy fumbled at the flash. It required both thumbs to thrust on the switch.

Then its beam came brashly. It cared nothing for ghosts. Still nothing happened. Jimmy moved the beam. It traveled eastward over toward the stairs.

But the curve of them hid what lay on the landing. For Jimmy knew that Something,

A GIRL—ALIVE

human or demon, had stumbled in its footing and plunged down that flight.

The boy got his legs to bear him at last. He walked with a shamble. Forward—forward—foot by foot—he crept back toward the newel. He reached it—gripped it. He turned the light beam upward.

Dropped limply out over the landing was an arm and hand!

Stair by stair, using the banisters, Jimmy pulled himself up. On the fifth he stopped. The supine body was visible. He played the beam from its feet to its head.

The fascination of terror galvanized him into continuing upward till he gained the landing. From this location the length of the upper hall was discernible.

What the lad saw staggered him more than the body at his feet. With his eyes barely on a level with the upper hall's flooring, he perceived something that not three living persons had known until that moment.

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A man had fallen on the landing, a lanky, red-faced, middle-aged man whom Jimmy had never seen and certainly could not identify.

But whoever he was, and whether or not he had cracked his skull the reporter from Boston wasted no time in learning. Something far more bizarre was inviting his attention beyond the victim of an accident in the darkness. He groped along the north wall of the upper hall till he reached a point directly opposite the cupola stairs.

THOSE STAIRS HAD VANISHED!

In their stead a yawning aperture was uncannily revealed. Out of this aperture a dull, bluish phosphorescence was gleaming into the hall, casting a blotch on the opposite wall.

Gazing glassily into the space thus illuminated, the reporter saw a sight that suggested black magic. The tower where the stairs had been disclosed a compartment some six or eight feet square, with floor lower than that

A GIRL—ALIVE

in the hall by twenty inches or perhaps two feet.

Down in this compartment was a pallet bed.

In the bed was a human body.

This was dimly visible in the rays of an oil lamp with a chimney of blue glass set on a box near the head of the bed.

Drawing closer to the brink of the step, the reporter saw more. The body on that cot was feminine—a *girl of compelling beauty*, laid out in profile, her head toward the east wall, a curtained window beyond her figure apparently opening out toward the highroad.

Viewed thus she had the aspect of a corpse. There was something horribly fascinating in her rigid posture: the outline of her figure; her dark hair, spread out on the soiled yellow pillow; the uncovered arms dropped beside her body.

No other persons or signs of life were anywhere in evidence. Yet the bluish lamp smoked as though recently lighted.

THE BLUE LAMP

Jimmy leaned a shoulder against the left casement. Down into the face of this sleeping beauty he turned his strong flash beam. Then came a torrent of relief. *The girl was alive!*

"WHO IS SHE?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

HER BREAST rose and fell. Her eyelids fluttered in the dazzlement. She opened them.

For a full half moment she stared at the ceiling.

Then she rolled her head weakly. It seemed to confuse her, that bright beam's origin. Eyes which had kept on growing after the rest of her had stopped were turned in Jimmy's direction and flooded with the blinding radiance.

She brought up one arm to screen her face.

Not six feet from her Jimmy Battles stood, his jaw sagging down as he watched.

"Please don't!" the girl cried faintly. *"Turn that light away."*

THE BLUE LAMP

The reporter turned the beam toward the floor:

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Dimly, weirdly, though the blue lamp glowed, with the beam turned floorward, the girl on the cot could discern him.

"What are *you* doing here?" she countered.

"I'm Jimmy Battles, a Boston newspaper man. Who are you?"

Instead of replying, the girl struggled up. Resting her weight on her elbow, Jimmy saw that she wore nothing but some sort of silken nightrobe. It gaped in front on a milk-white breast. Around the queer compartment she stared. Then she turned once more to the lad in the aperture.

"Where am I, anyway?"

"*Where are you?* Gosh, don't you know?"

The girl sat upright with the quilts about her hips. Luxurious black tresses rippled down her back. The curve of hair and back was exquisite. Between twenty-five and thirty

"WHO IS SHE?"

years old, the boy took her to be, with finely chiseled features. Her eyes—honey-brown in color, as he later found them—lost their blank, saucerlike aspect.

Suddenly, in an entirely different voice, she demanded:

"How did I come here?"

Her tone implied exasperation amounting to indignation. For the first time she noted her gaping bosom and clutched it together with a slender hand.

"You can search me," Jimmy stammered. "I only just found you when I saw your light."

The girl turned her head and glanced at the light. It was rapidly fogging with soot.

"That chimney will break with heat in a moment: you'd better turn down the wick," she ordered.

The boy discovered that his strength had come back. He lowered himself into the com-

THE BLUE LAMP

partment, crossed to the box and adjusted the flame.

"Who lighted that lamp?" the girl cried sharply.

"That's what a lot of people would like to know: who's been lighting blue lamps and carrying them about these premises lately. That's one of the reasons I'm up here tonight. To try and find out."

"What premises are these?"

"The Harmon premises—at Echo Fork—near Paris, Vt. Lookit, Miss— You're not Mary Harmon, are you?"

He held his breath for what she might reply.

"Paris, Vt.? You mean John Harmon's house?"

"John Harmon built it, yes. Twenty years ago."

"TWENTY YEARS!"

"Didn't you know it? This house has been
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"WHO IS SHE?"

closed since I was a youngster. They shut it up when Mary Harmon vanished."

"Is one of us insane?"

"I'm not insane; I can tell you that."

Yet he might have been dreaming.

"What year is this?" the girl next demanded.

Jimmy told her and waited.

"Where are my clothes?"

"Gosh, how should I know? I busted in here just after dark, through the cellar, and after a time I heard funny noises. Then a man fell downstairs—"

"A man? What man?"

"He's out on the landing. It knocked him unconscious. Then I saw—"

"He's out there now?"

"He was a moment ago. I climbed up from the lower hall to see who he was and how badly he was hurt, and I saw the light of this lamp in the hall—"

"If there's a man fallen downstairs, uncon-

THE BLUE LAMP

scious, hadn't you better see to him?" The girl made an effort as though she would get up from the cot. Then her dishabille occurred to her. "What does he look like?"

"He's a long, lanky, pink-faced man in a cheap suit of clothes—"

The way the girl cried it startled the reporter.

"Why, yes—"

"Is he wearing a gray derby hat and white woolen socks?"

"Yes," the boy responded.

If this announcement upset the girl, she kept her poise admirably.

"You'd better go see how badly he's hurt," she said.

"What'll I do with him if he's still unconscious?"

"Why ask me, pray? Put him in a bed. Bring a physician."

The boy flushed for the first time in an hour. Throwing on the flash beam he had extin-

"WHO IS SHE?"

guished, he climbed from the compartment and headed toward the stairs.

The landing was *empty!*

It frightened Jimmy, that. More than if he had found the fellow dead!

While Jimmy had been in the compartment, it was apparent, the man had regained consciousness, picked himself up—or been picked up by someone—and got out of sight.

Wondering boyishly if the body might possibly have rolled to the bottom of the flight, the reporter went down—completely down—to the lower hall. The light beam picked out no stranger nor signs of anyone. Jimmy even went out in the kitchen.

"Hello!" he cried. "Who are you? Where are you? Hello-oo-oo!"

But he heard no response.

Being less terrified, now that he knew that other human beings—regardless of their purpose—were in that pile with him, the reporter returned upstairs. He knew that already he

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had unearthed a newspaper sensation that would rock New England. That sleeping beauty *must* be Mary Harmon! What other construction could be placed on her predicament?

On the last stair step but one, at the top of the flight, the lad from Boston halted blankly, however.

The blue glow had been extinguished.

The aperture had vanished.

Jimmy forgot any personal jeopardy the place might hold for him, in his stupefaction at this turn of events. He ran toward the stairs. He pounded on them.

"Hello! Hello!" he cried. "Are you still in there? Is everything all right?"

His voice echoed through the surrounding chambers. But again there was no answer.

Then he tried to account for the behavior of the stairs. He tugged at them to see if they lifted, yet stairs were never more securely con-

"WHO IS SHE?"

structed. He tried to push them. He examined their corners. It was true that the finishing baseboards of the flight were not in contact with the plaster; enough space existed for the blade of a knife to be inserted. Yet when Jimmy shut off his flash in order that Stygian black might again surround him, no sign of any bluish light beneath came up through the crannies.

He sat down on the stairs and cogitated wryly.

What could it all mean?

Evidently the man who had plunged down the flight had somehow been responsible for opening the aperture. Had he been equally responsible for closing it? And why had the girl made no out-cry? Had she deliberately wanted to be imprisoned again? Was she still a few feet from him in that secret tower room?

As he asked himself these questions in hectic dismay, he waited for sounds that might indicate what had happened to the girl and

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whether she were still behind the wall. But not the slightest indication of her presence came to his ears.

Curiosity overcoming his nervousness now, he finally arose and investigated each bedroom on either side of the tower space. The walls on the side toward the campanile were intact. He even climbed into the cupola. As the Fowler boys had found, it was merely a barren room with four windows for sides. And the floor was firm; nothing tricky about it that Jimmy could perceive. By looking out of these tower windows opening east and west, however, and gazing down on the house below him, he noted that the distance the tower projected out from the façade of the residence in front was not equal to the depth of the room which he had quitted a few minutes before.

"Then that room where I talked with her runs back in under the cupola flight," he registered. "But how the devil were those stairs completely obliterated so I could pass

"WHO IS SHE?"

through? They must have hoisted up somewhere, and because I only had a flashlight I couldn't see where. Perhaps the reason I can't get them up is that there's a trick button somewhere—or maybe she's locked them on the inside."

The last seemed most logical. Secret buttons were too stagy. The girl might have got those stairs down in place in order to clothe herself. Yet what was her motive for not answering his summons, explaining what she meant by shutting him out in a dark, spooky hall?

But behind all these futile self-queries lay the greater and more dramatic interrogation: *Was she Mary Harmon?*

Had the long-missing heiress lain in that tower room through two decades—spring, summer, autumn, winter—in some queer catalepsy, to be aroused at last on this specific night, completing the search which his own father had instigated a generation before?

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It was possible but not probable. There must be some rational explanation for all this.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed while Jimmy sat waiting and cogitating.

"BY GOSH, Uncle Amos ought to know about this," he finally decided. "I can't write up what I've seen for the paper yet; I haven't a bit of supporting proof, and no one would believe me. But if the local sheriff came out here and found anything suspicious after prying up these stairs, I might have a story that'd knock the state cuckoo." Then after another ten minutes of tomblike silence, excepting for mice and the swirl of the wind, he exclaimed:

"I'm going to get out of here. I'm going into town!"

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

CHAPTER NINE

HE LEFT the residence by the side veranda door that opened from the sittingroom.

He got through the tunnel of trees. He mounted the grade. The road swung southward at the top of the hill—a three-mile arc till the Morrow place was reached. No car came along to offer him a ride. And the Morrow house was darkened: no chance of getting a machine or a rig. From the Morrow turn a couple of miles of level country wound westward through a valley. The mountains rolled around like blackened tents of gigantic size, pitched against jeweled heavens.

Such a lengthy journey under studded stars, with the night gale blowing the flavor of the Harmon place from his garments, the boy might have welcomed at any other time. But

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now he realized the importance of time. Much might happen in that haunted pile before he got back with his uncle. Other persons besides the phantom elderly lady were now mixed up in the plot. The girl he had aroused might even suffer physical injury if somehow she had come there against her will. He walked as swiftly as he could contrive, on the down-grade stretches accelerating to a dogtrot.

Once—just once—as he lagged, leg-weary, in Merritt's Hollow, the fancy struck him that he was being followed. He even waited a few moments, losing valuable time, to see if someone came along while he paused. But no one passed, and the lack of moonlight prohibited a view of much distance behind.

Striking a match by District Three school-house, he was astounded to note the hour—only ten minutes after eight o'clock. It seemed as though he had been in the Harmon house for hours and hours. Once a machine came from a distance in his rear, but it curved off on

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

another road before overtaking him. It was five minutes to nine o'clock when he saw the lights of Paris across "the Flats," and twenty minutes after when he had emerged from the covered bridge above Green River, crossed the railroad tracks and started down East Main Street.

Boland's cigar store, he perceived, was closed. He remembered his uncle—who owned a half interest in the shop and kept it open evenings—usually locked the place on the dot of nine except on Saturdays. That meant another half-mile walk to the house where his uncle boarded across the town, up Prospect Street hill.

He turned into the gate of this place at twenty minutes to ten. With a sinking in his vitals, he saw that the house was darkened also. Had his uncle gone to bed? Was he absent elsewhere on legal business.

Again and again Jimmy pulled at the bell.

"Who's there?" came a voice.

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"Uncle Amos—is that you? Come down and let me in. It's Jimmy."

"F'r Gawd's sake!"

At length the Vermonter descended the stairs. He was stuffing his nightshirt into his trousers. His huge feet were bare; his doughty head tousled. He shot back the bolt on the weather-beaten door.

"Jimmy, m' son!" he cried in gruff delight. He gripped the lad's arm and did everything but kiss him.

"Uncle Amos, you've got to come with me—at once—tonight—out to Echo Fork!"

"Eh? What's th' trouble?"

"I've come up here on a newspaper assignment, Uncle Amos. You know—the Harmon Mystery. I've almost solved it."

"You've what?"

"I think I've seen Mary Harmon. I found her in some sort of trance in a secret room in the campanile!"

"Th' hell you say!"

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

"And not only that, but I ran into another man out there—a queer, lanky, pink-faced man who pitched down the stairs and then disappeared."

"Come into th' sittin'-room."

He led the way into a room at the back. Lighting the table lamp, he pulled down the shades.

"I'm all alone here t'night," he explained. "Will's folks have gone t' Rutland. Now, what's the story 'bout seein' Mary Harmon?"

Jimmy told his story while the uncle filled his corncob. When he came to a recital of the stranger's plunge down the flight, the uncle stopped smoking. He stared wide-eyed.

"So you heard somethin' that sounded like rusted wheels turnin' just before his exclamation? Must have had somethin' t' do with them stairs. I allus did think the insides o' that house ain't been measured as they should be. More'n that, f'r twenty years I ain't been satisfied 'bout that little crippled Wrightson—

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an' what he was ever doin' t' th' place after Mary Harmon vanished. Well, go on!"

The boy told of the mysterious blue light, the aperture and what he saw therein. He recounted his converse with the girl verbatim.

"Durned funny!" growled the sheriff as the narrative concluded. "Lots o' things need explainin'! Mebbe we'll find out if we get in that compartment. What'd the girl look like? Would you recognize her fr'm a picture, providin' you saw one?"

"I'm positive of it."

"I got an old newspaper upstairs with a picture o' Mary Harmon in it! Dunno why I saved it. Must be somethin' told me th' day'd come when I might need it."

He left the boy and was gone upstairs.

"*That* her?" he demanded, returning.

"Great Heavens, yes!"

"Sure of it?" the sheriff asked awesomely.

"I'd swear to it on a stack of Bibles."

"Good glory, boy—can't be possible Mary

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

Harmon's been a sort o' Sleepin' Beauty in that tower-room through twenty years!"

"I don't care. That's her picture!" Then Jimmy had a thought, a stupendous thought: "Uncle Amos—you don't suppose—?"

"Well, well, don't suppose what?"

"You don't suppose Mary Harmon's been off somewhere all these years, in amnesia or something, and taken this method to come back to her home?"

Uncle and nephew stared at one another.

"Well, there's somethin' in *that* too," the old man admitted.

Then the pullbell jangled.

Both of them started.

"Who wants me at this time o' night?" the sheriff cried aloud.

Still barefoot, he answered the door.

"'Evenin', sir," said a voice from the porch. "Sorry to trouble you, but I'm after information. Is this the house that a young feller turned into a few minutes back?"

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"Mebbe. What of it?"

"Was he out to Echo Fork tonight—in the house that stands out there—what they call the Harmon place?"

Jimmy heard this plainly and appeared behind his uncle.

"Who wants to know?" he answered for the sheriff.

"Oh, there you are!" said the voice in the dark. "Say, could I talk with you a minute?"

"Come inside."

The speaker moved up in the line of the light.

Jimmy saw the man who had vanished from the landing!"

He was a person of painful leanness in a nondescript suit, scarlet necktie and yellow shoes. Though Jimmy's glance was glued on his features, the boy did not miss that tie or those shoes. And he wore a gray derby hat.

As a face the caller's countenance was peculiar—there was small doubt about it.

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

The man's whole head, in fact, was peculiar. It was round like a cheese, an Edam cheese, and about the same color. His flesh seemed afflicted with that queer skin malady that turned his epidermis pink. The hair, prematurely white, was parted on the top of this pinkness and pasted to his scalp with a barber's lotion. His ears—flat, roundish—resembled pink buttons sewed close against his skull.

For this late-evening call the stranger evinced a furtive air, an elusive, hunted aspect, which he covered over with bravado.

"I know you'll think it's funny," he began, "me buttin' in here. But—you'll learn I've got my reasons."

"Sit down in *there*," directed the reporter. And he jerked his head toward the small rear sitting-room.

The stranger cast a beady glance toward this apartment.

"Can't we talk right here?" he asked confi-

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dentially. He did not seem to be any the worse for his plunge down the stairs.

"What ails you, anyhow? What are you scared of?"

"All right—if that's the way you feel about it."

He preceded them into the sitting-room, not without caution. There he took the first convenient chair, uninvited, and throughout the call sat stiffly on its edge. He played with the derby—continually fingered it.

"Who's the old gent?" he asked Jimmy, another attempt at intimacy, as the sheriff loitered a minute by the hat rack.

"My uncle. It's his home. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Well, now, I'm not of much importance. But Watts is my name—if it does you any good to know. I'm in the legal line, in a small way. I daresay your mother'll tell you who I am, though I wasn't aware you had an uncle livin' right up here on the ground."

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

Jimmy repressed an impulse to exclaim, "What on earth are you talking about?" Instead, he demanded: "You mean you're a lawyer?"

"In a small way, you might say. Yes, in a small way." He hitched the chair closer, though he still remained seated on its edge. "*Can't* we go somewheres and talk privately? Think what'll happen if your uncle finds it out!"

It flashed on the boy in that instant that this queer pink-faced individual mistook him for somebody else. Glancing toward the door, he perceived his uncle listening purposely behind the hall portière.

"You needn't be afraid. My uncle's in on it."

Lawyer Watts drew back. "He *is*!"

"Sure. What made you think he wasn't?"

"That's right—you'd hardly come direct to his house otherwise, would you?"

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And yet Jimmy knew the rumped attorney was not at all convinced.

"Go on," he prompted. "Speak what's on your mind. Everything's confidential that's spoken in this house."

Never were the stranger's beady eyes more cautious. And yet he appeared decided to play a low card. Play it with innuendo and see what happened.

"I'm wise to everything!" he declared largely. And he turned the derby around in his hands.

"Oh, you're wise to everything."

"I certainly am. And I tell you it won't go. Not unless you take care o' me first."

"Take care of you!" Jimmy echoed.

"Let me in on it too. You see, your mother comin' to see me like she did, I'm halfway in on it, anyhow. And you need a good lawyer. Well, let me go the whole way. You'll—you'll find—I can be useful."

LAWYER WATTS ENTERS

Inasmuch as Jimmy's mother had been dead ever since the influenza epidemic which followed in the wake of the war, this was illuminating. But not quite enough.

"Oh," he said lamely. "So my mother came to see you!"

"Ha-ha! You weren't plannin' on that, were you? Well, she hadn't asked me a dozen questions 'fore I see what was afoot. I'm a smart man, I am, even if I say it myself."

"And just what is it you think I'm up to?"

"I see. You want to find out how much I really know. Well, you got papers, ain't you? Even the death certificate. Forged! And if you want me to go a step farther, I can tell you who forged 'em."

"Well," said Jimmy dully, trying to catch his cue, "who was it?"

"Speakin' no names, but just so's you'll know I ain't to be ignored in the divvy, was you ever to 993 Williamsburg Bridge?"

“HOW MUCH DO YOU WANT?”

CHAPTER TEN

PLAINLY the stranger expected to see Jimmy quail before such revelation. But the lad grasped that this must be the address of some forger and was too busy trying to make head and tail to the enigma to show facial reaction.

"How did you know I was here?" he demanded.

"Ha-ha! I followed you in from the Harmon place tonight. Though I must say this was hardly the spot I expected to see you go."

"Where'd you think I'd go?"

"The hotel naturally. That's where he's been stayin', ain't it?"

"Where who's been staying?"

"Oh, come, come. I guess that ain't necessary."

THE BLUE LAMP

"What were you doing out at the Harmon house?" Jimmy next asked.

"Just checkin' up," the man said airily. "Just makin' sure I was on the right track. And when he opened them stairs like he did, I knowed all of you was delivered right into my hands."

"So you think *he* opened the stairs, do you?" the reporter said with deliberate whimsiness.

For the first time Lawyer Watts looked blank.

"I—I—supposed it was him. *Or was it you?*"

Battles kept his composure with an effort. So there was still another party connected with this plot—someone Watts had seen but Jimmy hadn't.

"Where were *you hiding?*" the boy asked contemptuously.

"I got in there ahead o' you," he finally disclosed. "I'd hid in the closet in the northwest

"HOW MUCH DO YOU WANT?"

room. You passed so close to me once you could nearly reach in and touch me."

This too was illuminating, for Jimmy's peregrinations above stairs had not encompassed proximity to any closet door in the northwest chamber. In examining the place, after this man had vanished from the landing, the boy had merely gone to the door and cast in his light beam.

"Did you see my flashlight?"

"Flashlight? N-n-o, this was 'way before dark."

"Did you *see* me?"

"No, but I knowed you was there."

"All right, then what? Where were you hiding when the party we'll call 'he' opened up the stairs?"

"I'd got out of the closet and started across for the stairs—the flight to the lower floor, I mean. I was goin' down to watch you when you left. Then, of course, I could follow you

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and see where you was stayin'. But you shoved up the stairs and nearly caught me."

"So it was in running away so you wouldn't be seen that you missed your footing and tumbled down the flight?"

"Ha-ha. Yes, that's about right."

"Got a pretty bad bump, didn't you!"

"Nothin' to speak of. I came out of it soon enough. Though my head sort of aches. I struck it on the banisters."

"Where'd you go when you finally aroused?"

"Down in the library. I hid behind a chair."

"Did you see me go out? What door did I use?"

"You went out the side sittin'-room door onto the veranda."

"All that ain't important," declared the sheriff, scuffing in. Obviously he had decided that his nephew was messing things—not getting vital information, at least. He crossed to

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his chair and adjusted the light. He did not greet the caller, and the latter was annoyed. "What we're interested in findin' out is what you're hornin' in for, *an' how much you want.*"

FOUND—A BLUE LAMP

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE older man had grasped what the boy had felt vaguely. This fellow was merely an ambulance-chasing attorney.

"Oh, I don't know," the caller parried. "How much d'you think it's worth to keep my mouth shut and let all o' you get away with it? Pretty high stakes you seem to be playin' for, all of you."

"How much do you want?"

"Seems to me it ought to be worth at least a fifth of what you pry loose—if you do. Yes, a million'd be about right. I could use a million. Never do another tap of law work or have to look for another case. Ha-ha!"

Jimmy and his uncle exchanged stupefied glances. This fellow spoke as though a fifth of the stakes to which he referred amounted to a million dollars. That meant the conspira-

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tors were after five millions. What five millions? Ostensibly Mary Harmon's five millions. What else? And he spoke of forged documents—a death certificate. But who in the name of Satan was he mistaking Jimmy for? And why the girl in the tower?

"When did this boy's mother come t' consult you?" the sheriff had the wit to demand.

Again the derby came in for much handling.

"Come, come!" snapped old Crumpett.

The caller became defiant. "It's private business between me and her. Professional ethics between a lawyer and his client. I ain't called to explain it to no one till I know all about 'em—and whether they'll trade."

"What sort of deal do you want?"

"Oh, I'd take ten thousand on account—a sort o' retainer—right now, ha-ha! You pay me in cash, and I'll know you mean business."

"What's your full name?"

"I told you. Watts. Ephraim Watts."

FOUND—A BLUE LAMP

"Well, Ephraim Watts, where is it you do business? What bar do you practice at?"

"Dunno's I'm prepared to tell you that either—till I get a down payment. Y' see, folks that ain't businesslike might decide from snap judgment that bein' took in with you because I'd learned so much was a form of blackmail. And I don't want that charge put against my professional reputation."

"But we ain't gonna pay no ten thousand dollars t' no stranger who merely walks in here off th' street. Do you take us f'r fools?"

The man was abashed.

"Well," he conceded, "my home's in the West."

"Oh, your home's in th' West! What part o' the West?"

"That'd be answerin' your first question. Seems t' me I've sort o' got the upper hand, Mr. Wilson, and you better take me at my face value. Either that or the ethics o' my per-

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fession'll force me to go to the authorities and tell 'em what's afoot."

"Mister, you're actin' almighty funny. What's more, I'm convinced you know a devilish lot th' authorities right now is hankerin' t' learn." The sheriff's face became reddened with anger. "They's a lot t' this Harmon business I'm none too pleased with. From what you say, they's crime in it somewheres."

"Crime!"

"Yes, I said *crime*! You've come here an' made yourself liable f'r blackmail—"

"Me! How about yourselves?"

"Never mind us. Lawyer Ephraim Watts, if you don't want t' find yourself in dam' hot water, I advise you—"

But Crumpett stopped in the middle of his outburst. The bell on the hall telephone was jangling.

"Answer the phone, Jimmy," he ordered.

"JIMMY!" cried their caller, turning on the boy. "Ain't your name Walter?"

FOUND—A BLUE LAMP

"Answer that, Jimmy," the uncle ordered sternly. "An' you, Lawyer Watts, sit right where you are."

The visitor was trapped. But the telephone bell continued to jangle. Jimmy went to the hall.

"Hello?" his uncle heard him call. "What? . . . yes, he's here. . . . What? *Murder?*"

Watts and the sheriff both sprang to their feet.

"Stay right where you are!" Amos Crumpett roared. "Consider yourself under arrest—"

"Arrest! What for? Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm th' sheriff o' this 'ere county, by heck. An' you've stuck your foot right int' a trap."

The caller turned bilious.

"The sh-sh-sheriff?" he stammered.

"Uncle Amos, there's a man been found dead out at the Harmon house—"

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Jimmy was halted. The stranger's jaundice had shifted to ivory. Thousands of tiny red veins like the silk threads in banknotes stood out lividly against that whiteness. He gave one wild glance at the door to the kitchen. He whirled and saw the door to the hall.

Then he leaped.

He leaped against Crumpett, knocking him forward. The sheriff clawed out and upset against a chair. Jimmy dropped the receiver and clutched at their quarry. The impact was calamitous. The boy lost balance and spun against the hatrack. Three more jumps took Watts to the door. Through it he caromed, and it whammed against the clapboards. By the time the uncle had picked himself from the broken chair the pink-faced blackmailer was sprinting down the hill.

"Take after him, Jimmy! Don't let him escape!"

But Jimmy was groggy from his bump against the hatrack. He tried to get his direc-

FOUND—A BLUE LAMP

tion and walked into the stairs. He staggered, still dazed, upon the veranda. He was barely in time to see the visitor dart between two houses a half block down the grade.

Nevertheless the boy followed after. Not until he had arrived hatless at the spot where the man had vanished did he realize the futility of tracing him successfully. The yards behind the houses were filled with great areas of inky-black shadows. Strange fences intersected. Hiding places were everywhere. Nursing his bruise, he went back to his uncle's.

He discovered Sheriff Crumpett just hooking the receiver.

"Where'd he go?" the old man cried angrily.

Jimmy told him.

"Th' scalawag! Legged it, by heck! Found he'd stuck his funny-lookin' head plumb in th' jaws o' th' law."

"By the way he scooted, he's as crooked as the devil."

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"How could he be anything else, with a head shaped like his'n? I'll send out word an' have him picked up. Seein' there ain't no trains out o' here till mornin', he prob'ly can't go very far. He'll be easy t' grab—with a skin so pink."

"What about the 'phone—the man found killed?"

"Yeah, that was Paul Lyman called. He's kid reporter on th' local evenin' paper. Claims him an' th' Fowler boys was out t' th' Harmon house t'night t' investigate th' lights an' stumbled acrost a chap with his head crushed—blood spattered all over th' place—body still warm—"

"Where did they find him?"

"Upper hall, Paul says. Near th' stairs t' th' cupola."

"Lord, then it's happened since I left! There was nobody there when I quit the house."

"Well, we gotta get out there—"

FOUND—A BLUE LAMP

"Who is he, Uncle Amos?"

"Paul couldn't say. Nobody he knows, at any rate, though he claims th' feller resembles someone who's been stoppin' lately at th' Whitney House—"

"It must be the person that Watts called 'he'l'"

"Well, go t' th' barn an' back out Will's car. I gotta get on th' rest o' my clothes. Key t' th' barn is hangin' by th' sink. But first, while I'm dressin', ring up Squire Butterworth. Tell him t' have his clothes on t' go out there with us. We'll pick him up on our way out East Main Street."

The boy found the phone book to get the squire's number. His uncle climbed the stairs. Halfway up he glanced over the banisters.

"Queer thing about it, Jimmy," he remarked. "Accordin' t' Lyman, near th' knees o' th' dead man *they found a blue lamp!*"

A MAN AND A WOMAN

CHAPTER TWELVE

THEY drove out East Main Street as the clock tolled eleven. Jimmy rode beside his uncle, who handled the wheel. Squire Butterworth was a back-seat passenger, likewise Dr. Chapin, the coroner, whom they found closing his office in the Cass Block.

Across the bridge that spanned the river, over "the Flats," up into the woods, the car traveled swiftly in the raw autumn night. It was cold in the mountains. The uplands showed frost. No moon would appear till late in the morning.

"Where'd Lyman phone from?" Butterworth demanded.

"Pumpton's," answered Crumpett. He threw into second for the climb up Cobb Hill. "That's th' nearest house with a phone."

They passed the Coggswell farm, the

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Wheeler place, and at length neared the grist mill that featured Merritt's Hollow. They turned into a yard before reaching this grist mill. Paul Lyman was waiting.

He was a wiry, black-eyed, eager-faced boy, not much removed from Jimmy in type, yet the six years' disparity was apparent in their ages. Paul, two years out of high school, had remained in Paris to work on The Telegraph. But between the two lads was their common vocation.

"Now what's it all about?" asked the sheriff as he backed from Pumpton's yard and headed toward the Fork. A car containing the two Pumpton boys kept a little way behind. Jimmy had relinquished his seat beside his uncle in order that Paul might tell the officer his story. The reporter from Boston leaned forward to hear the recital between the squire and the doctor.

"Just as I told you over the phone, the Fowler boys and I found a dead man—"

A MAN AND A WOMAN

"Where's th' two Fowlers?"

"They stayed with the body while I went to phone you. It's this way—they went hunting again today and reached Echo Fork just about dark. They said they sat down on the gate stone with their guns against the fence. While they rested there, occasionally glancing at the house for signs of the spook, the stars came out and the night wind sprang up. Suddenly in the cellar Seba saw a light."

"A blue light?"

"No; it was more like a flash. They caught it first as it seemed to travel across the basement windows. Then it shifted upstairs. To the ground floor, that is."

"Lord," laughed Jimmy, "that light they saw was *mine!*"

"Yours?" exclaimed Paul. He turned in surprise with his elbow on the seat-back. "You been out to the Harmon house tonight?"

"I've been stalking the haunt for the Boston Express."

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"Never mind my nephew," the sheriff interposed. "What about the Fowlers?"

"Well, they saw this flashlight—at least *some* sort of radiance—and they thought the ghostess was up to her tricks. But they lacked the nerve to pry in and see. They started into Paris to come back with help. I overtook them in my bus. I'd been over to Hebron and—"

"Then it was *your* car that tore past the house around seven o'clock!" Jimmy cried.

"Yeah, I passed around seven, I guess. And I overtook the Fowlers just beyond the school-house. They told me of the light and asked me to drive back. We might have gotten there sooner, but I had to have a blow-out. It was after eight o'clock before we'd put on a patch, for I'd used up my spare for a puncture in Hebron. Well, we got to the Fork. I parked the bus in the spruces, and the bunch of us piled out. The house was all dark then; not a

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sign of life anywhere. So we hid ourselves in different places, waiting for those flashes to reappear—”

“Did you see my nephew come out?”

“No, we—”

“Nor signs of a tall, funny-lookin’ feller in a gray derby hat, long neck—”

“No one *left* while we were there,” Paul declared. “It was those who *entered* that puzzled us. A man and a woman!”

“What?” snapped the sheriff. “A man and a woman?”

“What time was this, would you say?” asked Jimmy.

“Somewhere round half past eight.”

“Then I’d been out of the place long enough to get clear beyond the schoolhouse. I remember looking at my watch there. It was ten minutes past eight.”

“What sort o’ man?” the sheriff questioned. “What kind o’ woman? ’Twarn’t th’ old lady Jake saw, was it?”

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"It might easily have been. We couldn't make them out very clearly. There warn't enough light—"

"Where was you hidin' when *they* appeared?"

"Up along the wall of the Fork that turns to Wickford. This man and woman came down the grade from the direction of Wickford!"

"Th' hell you say! Afoot?"

"I'd almost swear they came in a rig that they prob'ly left somewheres up toward Gleason's. We hadn't seen signs of any auto head lamps, but all of us heard a horse nicker plainly just a few minutes before they showed up."

"You saw 'em go int' th' property?"

"That's the funny part. They didn't go into the back of the house through the ell or the bulkhead. After they'd climbed over the wall, *they headed straight for the tool house*. The man helped the woman over the wall about

A MAN AND A WOMAN

thirty feet south of us. Then they plowed through the dead grass straight for the door of the shack where the Fowlers had seen the old dame disappear the night she screamed."

"Did they have any light?"

"Nope. Nothing lighted that back yard but the stars. And pretty soon we heard the door sort of slam on the tool house—"

"What'd they look like, th' little you saw of 'em?"

"The man was short and clad in an overcoat. He wore a soft hat and thick-lensed spectacles."

"All right," prompted Crumpett; "they climbed over th' wall an' went on t' th' tool house. Then what?"

"They closed the tool-house door behind them and didn't come out."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I'LL bet that tool house ain't ever been examined like it should be," contributed Squire Butterworth. "Some of us ought to have done it long before this. Go on!"

"We waited and waited for them to reappear. The next thing we knew there were lights glowing on the second floor of the house. They'd show from one window, then fade out and come in another. Finally we saw the queer *bluish* light reflected in the cupola."

"There's some sort o' connection, then," declared the squire, "between that embankment shed and the residence."

"Get along t' the findin' of th' body," Sheriff Crumpett commanded. "We'll be there pretty quick, an' I want all th' details."

"Well, I don't know how long we waited—a half or three-quarters of an hour, anyhow

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—when I finally suggested the three of us go in. There hadn't been any lights show in the bedroom windows for the last ten minutes, though the bluish glow in the campanile continued. We crept close to the ell and got in by the bulkhead. Someone had pulled a No Trespass sign from the bulkhead. It was lying in the grass, and Seba stepped on it and split it. The wind was blowing pretty strong about the Fork, however. Any noises we made could never have been heard. We lifted the bulkhead and went down the steps—”

“Did you ever see such a horrible hole?” asked Jimmy.

“I'll say it's horrible. The cobwebs—fungus—”

“We've all seen th' cellar!” the sheriff snapped impatiently. “'Cepting Doc Chapin, mebbe. You went up through th' cellar? How'd you light your way?”

“We had plenty of matches, between the three of us. But once in the kitchen we were

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glad for the darkness. They were still in the house, those people upstairs. We could hear them quarreling."

"Quarrelin', eh? What'd they say?"

"We couldn't quite catch. Just the jangle of their voices came down through the house—muffled at times, as though moving from one room to the other. Then finally we heard a yell. Not a scream like the Fowlers heard the woman give in the tool shed. A yell that a man might have let out when somethin' scared him suddenly. After that came a bump—a whale of a bump that jarred the upper floor. After that came silence, a long, long silence."

"And then you went upstairs?" asked Jimmy.

"No, it was another long time before we dared go upstairs. By the time we had the courage the house had been silent for another twenty minutes. We stuck our heads into the dining-room and didn't hear anything. We

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crossed the dining-room into the sitting-room. Then we stuck our heads into the hall. The upper part of the house, what we could see of it, was black as pitch. No yellow lights, no blue lights, no sounds, no voices. Stair by stair the three of us crept up to the landing. I'll bet we stayed on that landing another ten minutes. We weren't a bit anxious to rush that hunt. When the upper hall continued inky black without sounds of anyone in it, Seba struck a match."

"From the landin'?" asked the sheriff.

"Frank and I were still on the landing. Seba'd gone up three or four more steps. He shielded the flame at first and took his hand away when it burned up bright. Then's when we caught sight of the body, lying down the hall."

"Go on! Hurry up; we're almost there."

"It certainly gave us the willies, the sight of it. I got another match lighted as Seba's went out. Frank called to it—the body—to see

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if it moved. Then, just a little way from it, toward the stairs, we saw the base of a hand lamp. The chimney had been broken, but the bottom held oil. We none of us thought of that body being dead; we supposed the man had been knocked unconscious, and we'd have to do something for him. But when Frank had dabbed the wick of that lamp, and gone around on the other side of the figure, he let out a yell that nearly sent us running. The man's head was smashed. The carpet all round him was soggy with blood."

"You mean th' feller that climbed th' wall with th' woman in black?"

"No, another man entirely. A stout, well-dressed, elderly man. In fact, I'm certain I've seen him in Paris, in and out of the Whitney House."

"We'll see him for ourselves," Crumpett said grimly. "You don't remember what his name was, from th' Whitney House register?"

"No, the paper pays no attention to the

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drummers and business guests that stop at the hotel."

"What'd you walk t' Pumpton's f'r—if you've got your own car? Why didn't you use it an' get me here quicker?"

"It's still up in the spruces. When I ran to get it I discovered the tire we'd patched was soft again. I didn't try to pump it. I'd reach Pumpton's sooner afoot."

"What's them lights now—showin' upstairs?" Down into the Fork the sheriff's car had coasted. The sheriff stopped it across from the gate.

"The lamp the Fowlers lighted, prob'ly, while I went for help."

The Pumpton car came up close behind, and halted likewise as Crumpett killed his engine.

The sheriff raised the car's front cushion and procured a flashlight that lay beneath the seat. Jim Pumpton had a lantern. Jimmy had the light he had brought from Boston. The

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seven crossed the road and passed through the gate.

"We can go in the front way," Lyman suggested. "I left the door unlocked."

They mounted the veranda. The door yielded readily.

"That you, Paul?" came a voice from upstairs.

"Yep, it's me. And I've brought Sheriff Crumpett."

The Fowler boys appeared. They were sick of their vigil, it was all too apparent.

"Lord, what a place!" exclaimed Dr. Chapin. He was a rotund, white-headed, soft-spoken old man with a calm, kindly face and badly rumpled clothes.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Seba retorted, halfway up the stairs.

They mounted to the upper floor, the hall made eerie from the lamp flame on the floor.

"We haven't moved a thing," Frank Fowler

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declared. "We simply lit the lamp and waited till you got here."

The small yellow flare flickered and wavered in the drafts of the night. It gave off much carbon, for the wick was befouled. Yet the body beyond it riveted all eyes.

"Turn him over, Doc," the sheriff suggested. "Here, I'll give you a hand."

The group stood horrified when the body lay face upward. Rigor mortis had set in; the limbs had stiffened.

The spectators looked down on a man in his fifties with silky gray hair and a strong, hawkish profile. Pieces of the rotten carpet adhered to forearms, hands and temple on the side where his skull had been cracked in a sickening bruise.

"Dead as a door post!" the coroner exclaimed. "He was struck from the side. The blow nearly brained him."

The sheriff held the flashlight steadily on the features. Aside from the dust and blood,

the man's dress had been immaculate. At length Crumpett glanced across at the squire.

"Jabez," he demanded, "does that face look at all familiar t' you?"

The squire stepped over the stiffened legs to study the stranger from beside the officer.

"Lord!" he cried finally. "'Course I only seen him once or twice—and twenty years ago at that—but—"

"Ain't this th' foreign duke, or somethin', that come up t' see Mary Harmon—as twenty years have aged him?"

"What do you think, Ansell?" the squire asked the doctor.

"I never got a good square look at him. But I'd say it's him, just the same—"

"Look in his pockets," cried Jimmy. "He'll certainly have something in them to identify him."

Crumpett rifled the pockets. Some keys and

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a handkerchief were first laid on the carpet, then a cigar case, a fountain pen and silver pencil, a cigar lighter—of solid gold apparently—a wallet. This last was stuffed with ten- and twenty-dollar bank notes; the sheriff later counted them and found \$193 therein. Several letters were produced from the inner breast pocket of his coat. They bore foreign postage stamps of a country the Vermonters could not identify. The address on all of them was: "Joseph Brisk, Esq., Ritz-Carlton Hotel, New York City." But when their contents were opened the language in which they were written could not be read by anyone present.

"It's Mary Harmon's count, all right," confirmed Dr. Chapin. "Just ain't possible the names should be so near alike unless he'd made one from the other."

"What do you mean, Ansell?"

"Mary Harmon was going to marry Count Josef Briskow," Jimmy Battles interposed. "I

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read it in some clippings coming up in the train."

"What's more," added Chapin, "if we need any more confirmation of his identity, here's labels on the inside of his clothes from tailors in Paris—Paris, France."

"What could *he* be doin' back here in Vermont twenty years after Mary Harmon vanished?" the officer mused.

"It'd seem to me, Amos," exclaimed the squire, "that the really important thing is, *who killed him?*"

The sheriff raised his eyes and regarded his nephew from beneath bushy brows. Then he glanced at the spot where the body had been found. It was lying about three feet out from the stairs behind which Jimmy had contended he had actually talked with the long-missing heiress. The boy knew the question troubling his uncle. Could the girl herself have killed him?

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And yet, according to Lyman, still another woman and man had been on those premises in the last two hours. What had become of them? And what instrument had been used to effect this fatality?"

Lyman turned to Jimmy:

"What was it *you* saw here tonight?"

"Never mind that now," the uncle objected. "As Jabez suggests, th' folks who did this murder are either in this house or at least not far off. They've got t' be nabbed an' landed in jail."

"There's another car drawin' up out front," Jim Pumpton declared, glancing across the open southeast chamber, through the window to the road. "A big covered wagon!"

"Blake Whipple's undertakin' ambulance, prob'ly. I phoned him t' follow us, soon's he could make it. If you're through with your medical exam, Doc, we'll let Blake have th' corpse an' tote it t' town."

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"Here's a telegram," announced Chapin.
"In his rear pants pocket."

The sheriff smoothed back the sheet of dog-eared paper the doctor had discovered. He held his flashlight to see the purple typing.

"*This* is in English, anyhow," he cried.
"Listen!"

But Jimmy was reading for himself:

Mr. Joseph Brisk,

Whitney House, Paris, Vt.

Have decided cannot join you. Watts knowledge makes whole plan too risky. Have told ma everything. Sorry. Am leaving to-night. Going West.

WALTER.

"Walter!" cried the nephew. "Uncle Amos, you remember that's the same name—"

"That th' pink-faced cuss called you by mistake? But what does he mean, 'have told Ma everything'?"

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"Ma might mean an abbreviation for mother. It might also stand for Mary Harmon's initials."

"By heck, that's right. Anyhow, it's plain t' be seen that this Walter, whoever he is, was mixed up in the duke's monkeyshines an' suddenly got cold feet."

"It's some sort of plot to get hold of the dormant Harmon fortune, Uncle Amos. You recall Watts said something about forged documents—a death certificate—"

"Guess you're right in that too. But meantime they've either had a fallin' out among themselves, or this duke come on th' real heiress in a trance an' she basted him good."

"Real heiress! Trance!" exclaimed Butterworth and Chapin.

"Accordin' t' my nephew, they's a secret room beneath these cupola stairs. He saw it opened t'night, an' it had a girl inside it. Fr'm a picture t' my house he identified her as th' missin' Mary Harmon. Don't know what

hocus-pocus there is t' it—that she should sleep twenty years like ol' Rip Van Winkle, or th' Beauty in th' fairy tale—but one thing's certain: we got t' get int' that room somehow an' see what it holds. Who built this house, anyhow?"

"Boston contractors," replied Squire Butterworth, "if I recall correctly."

"Did you ever hear anything 'bout a secret room in th' tower?"

"No." The lawyer laughed nervously. "Sounds like a movin'-picture plot. First house I ever heard of in Vermont to have such a place—providin' you ain't spoofin' us."

"I only wish I were spoofing you," Jimmy answered grimly.

Blake Whipple and his assistant ascended with the "death basket" as this conference ended. While Briskow's body was being removed Jimmy drew his uncle into the northeast chamber.

"I want to ride back with the undertaker,"

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he declared. "This murder, after all the mystery around this place lately, is a beat for the Express—the biggest my paper will have had in months."

"No, you better wait an' go back with me."

"But I've got to put in a call from somewhere. I'll have time to catch the mail editions if I tell Newton what's happened by long-distance wire."

"Newton?"

"He's managing editor. And he stays at his desk till a quarter to four."

"Soon's I'm done with Blake I'm goin' to bust in this room beneath th' stairs. Don't you want t' do it with me an' report what we find?"

"What time is it now?" The lad looked at his watch. "A quarter after twelve! Can I go back in your car as soon as we've done it?"

"Pumpton'll take you over t' his house; you can tellyphone Boston fr'm there."

"I'm afraid of this kid, Lyman. He tells me

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he's Associated Press correspondent for this part of Vermont. If he files an A. P. story on this murder, good night!"

"Paul won't go nowheres t' report nothin' till I give him orders. I'm in charge o' this case. He'll do as I tell him."

INSIDE THE PARTITION

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE murdered nobleman was carried down the stairs. A crestfallen local reporter was ordered not to leave the premises till the sheriff gave permission.

"Now," said that dignitary, "th' first thing all of us is goin' t' do is find out how that old man an' woman got int' this house. They went in through th' tool house, young Lyman tells us. Few minutes later strange lights was showin' on this upstairs floor. That'd seem t' prove they's some sort o' passage connectin' th' two. Point is, t' find it!"

"Instead of goin' down into the tool house," argued the squire, "and investigatin' from that end, why not pry up these stairs, get into that compartment and find the passage *out* of it?"

The sheriff trod on the cupola flight. Flash-

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light in hand, he examined the construction.

"Don't wonder Jimmy was stumped," he commented. "They sure are built substantial."

After some discussion they decided to gain entrance to the secret room through the window which Jimmy had seen earlier in the evening. He and the Pumptons located a ladder in the cellar and brought it out.

When they got to the front they discovered the sheriff out on the roof of the broad veranda.

The ladder was a crude, homemade affair, constructed of twin two-by-fours with connecting cleats for rungs. But when lifted into place it reached sufficiently high to enable an intruder to smash the glass of the campanile window, pull himself up and over the sill. First, however, they placed it against the veranda, and the sheriff descended.

"Fetch me th' hammer you'll find in th' tool kit o' my car, Jimmy," the uncle ordered. The

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squire, young Lyman and the Fowlers remained in the upstairs windows.

Battles brought the hammer. The sheriff placed the ladder. Hooking the Pumpton lantern in his left elbow, he started to climb.

Rung by rung, testing the ladder's strength with each step, the sheriff hoisted his two hundred pounds. Arriving at the third rung from the top, the old man was able to reach up a hand and grasp the bottom sill. Steadying himself, he went up another step. The group held the ladder firmly at the bottom. Crumpett's head was now above the casing. He could look in through the glass, see the room through dim panes.

"Got a curtain hung over it," he called to those below. "Stand clear! I'm goin' t' hammer th' glass."

Pressing himself close against the left-hand wall to avoid flying angles himself, Crumpett struck at the pane nearest him. Its tinkling crash echoed uncannily up and down the

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Fork. After the first blow the sheriff waited. He listened for noises inside the room. But after the tinkling echoes had died no sounds reacted.

"Hello in there!" the old man cried.

No response.

The sheriff then started the noisy, dangerous business of wholly demolishing the window to permit an entrance. Glass fell inside. Glass crashed on the steps ten feet below. His savage little hammer then broke the strip up the center of the sash.

Making certain no vicious teeth remained along the lower strip, Crumpett next reached inside and yanked at the drapery. It resisted stoutly. He finally had to lift it.

Those below saw him lay the hammer aside on the sill, bring the lantern around and swing it inside. His head disappeared in under the curtain. For a moment he remained that way. Then he gave a lurch, and his feet left the ladder.

INSIDE THE PARTITION

He executed a comical maneuver for one of his years, squirming into that compartment head and shoulders first. But at length he contrived it.

Whatever material covered the window, it was opaque enough to completely obscure the gleam of the sheriff's lantern. Amos Crumpett might have gone over the sill only to fall down a pit for all that those in the yard below could see or hear of him for two or three minutes.

"Uncle Amos!" Jimmy called. "Can I come up now?"

No response from the window above.

"Uncle Amos—is everything all right?"

Not a movement of the drapery; not a sound overhead.

"You'd better go up, young feller," Pump-ton advised. His voice was strangely hoarse. "No tellin' what he's run into—with murderers abroad tonight."

The lad felt suddenly bilious. Had his

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uncle climbed into some sort of trap? If so, why had he made no outcry?

"Uncle Amos! Uncle Amos!"

The boy's calls brought Squire Butterworth and Lyman to the southeast chamber windows along the front of the house.

"What's wrong?" the squire demanded.

"The sheriff's gone in through the tower window, and we ain't heard nothin' from him," Pumpton answered.

"Well, climb up, you fool, and find out what's become o' him."

Jimmy was halfway up the ladder as the squire stepped out close at hand on the roof of the veranda. The edge of the campanile jogged out beyond the edge of the roof, however, and the attorney could not see around it.

The nephew had difficulty holding his flashlight, gripping the cleats, and getting his gun in readiness.

"Steady, boy," warned the squire. "Don't fall!"

INSIDE THE PARTITION

At length the lad got a grip on the sill, yanked the curtain aside and thrust on his light beam.

"Gosh! He isn't here!" he cried.

"You mean the room's empty?" asked Pumpton from below.

"Absolutely empty—of everything but a bed!"

"Sit up on the ~~wi~~ndowsill to take your weight off the ladder," Pumpton instructed. He was a rawboned young Vermonter with waist bigger than his shoulders. Now that Jimmy had preceded him, he was eager to follow. "I'm comin' up."

Jimmy swung up till he sat on the sill. Pumpton's head was soon on a level with his knees. The younger Pumpton boy, Fred, held the ladder base firm.

"Uncle Amos!" Jimmy called, holding the curtain so Pumpton could look in.

But still there was no reply from the sheriff.

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This was serious. Where had he gone? What could have happened to him?

Jimmy poked the beam around the compartment. The two at the ladder's top discerned that the ceiling of the cubby was now formed by the stairs that led into the cupola. The cot on which Jimmy had confronted the girl stood exactly as he had seen it before, except that it was empty. The box stood near its foot, but was minus its lamp—doubtless it had been the same lamp whose chimney had been broken at the attack on Briskow. Queer, to relate, the quilts and counterpane on the cot were neatly spread and tucked in as by the hand of an expert feminine bedmaker.

"You mean you saw a girl on that cot there tonight?"

"I certainly did," vowed Jimmy. "But to hell with her! *What's become of Uncle Amos?*"

INSIDE THE PARTITION

He swung his legs over, inside the room. Pump-ton soon followed.

"Gosh!—look—" cried the latter when the curtain had dropped in place.

Jimmy's lamp, poked toward the southwest corner of the compartment, had picked up a vertical aperture about fifteen inches wide; it ran from the floor almost to the "ceiling"—at least that part of it forming the cupola floor not made by the downward tilt of the stairs. This slit in the western wall's surface should have opened into the southwest chamber. But when Jimmy had crossed closer, he saw a second wall—the chamber wall—of studding and unfinished lath, a couple of feet further on.

"It's a space inside the partition. And there's a sort of small landing here. Yes, by jove, *and some stairs!*"

HIDDEN STAIRS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STAIRS?" said Pump-ton.

"Yes," said Jimmy. "Stairs! They run down between the walls. Uncle prob'ly went down 'em to see where they led to. UNCLE AMOS!" he called down the pit.

Still the sheriff failed to respond.

"Golly, I hope nobody's bagged him. Queer he can't hear me. It's not like him to keep silent."

"Maybe he heard somebody there. Maybe he don't want to call back to us for fear o' givin' himself away."

"I'm only wondering if perhaps he needs help."

"Did he carry a gun?"

"He usually does. It wouldn't be like him to forget it tonight."

They looked at one another anxious-eyed

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across the indirect illumination of the flashlight.

"You don't suppose his body's under the cot?"

But no sheriff's body was under the bed. Only dust so thick it resembled a carpet of feathers. Jimmy straightened. His glance searched the cubby more closely.

The walls had been plastered, but the plaster had not been papered. Sheer, unbroken walls, they appeared, white when first made, now dingy with time. Excepting that aperture that led somewhere below. The edges between the studs were ragged, as though the tall, narrow hole had been chopped with an ax. On the floor by the cot was a strip of red carpet. The place reeked thickly with the smell of old mortar—mortar and dried lumber.

Jimmy concerned himself with the bed.

Old-fashioned spiral springs were covered

HIDDEN STAIRS

with an inexpensive mattress. The pillow, quilts, sheets, were horribly mildewed, though lack of dust showed the bed's recent use. Jimmy pulled the bedclothes completely to the bottom.

"Gee! What's this?" he cried.

Lying deep in the bed was a four-foot length of pipe. At least it looked like pipe till Pumpton picked it up—pipe an inch or more in diameter and corroded with rust. It was bent slightly at an angle.

"Do you know what this is?" the farmer demanded.

"I know it's dirtied these sheets. My Lord, there's not only rust on these sheets—*there's blood!*"

"Cripes!"

"Look at your hands!"

Pumpton threw the thing from him. Both palms were befouled.

"That's the handle of an iron wheelbarrow," he gasped faintly. "And I guess it's

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what that stranger was brained with. But who hid it in the bed?"

Fred Pumpton's head now showed beneath the curtain. "The squire wants to know what you've found," he announced.

"Plenty, tell him. But we've only just commenced."

"They got out this way all right," Jimmy cogitated. "Brained their man, got into this compartment, closed those stairs after them somehow, hid the bar in the bed and scooted down between the partition. Holy smoke, I wish we'd hear some signs of Uncle Amos!"

"There's prob'ly some way of getting down between these partitions and reaching the tool shed. Maybe he's gone that way and will show up from below in a minute. Fred, you go down, and around out back. See if there's any sign of Crumpett anywhere in the—"

"Th' hell I will!" young Pumpton protested. "I ain't doin' no careless runnin' round

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here tonight—not if th' sheriff's suddenly vanished."

"What's these things in the corners that appear to be more pipes?" Jimmy exclaimed, peering beyond the farmer's shoulders.

The older Pumpton whirled about. The reporter stepped back toward the window by which they had entered. On either side of it, set close in the joint of the intersecting walls, were vertical tubes; they came from the ceiling and went into the floor.

"They're not pipes, they're *ropes!*" he declared an instant later.

"Ropes!"

"What can these support? Why are they hung here?"

The boy made a purely instinctive motion. They looked so much like bell ropes that he gripped one and pulled it. Half expecting to hear a bell peal out in consequence, he started with a cry at the phenomena resulting.

With scarcely a jar, the ceiling stairs lifted.

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Hinged to the top, balanced to a hair, the lower end of that "ceiling" swung upward from the north. The reporter and Pumpton turned to confront the startled faces of Squire Butterworth, Dr. Chapin, Paul Lyman and the Fowlers. From their faces in the upper hallway, to which they had returned from the front windows, the group looked down through the aperture produced.

"How'd you do that?" exclaimed the lawyer.

"I pulled on one of these corner ropes, I guess, when I was in here; before I was too surprised at the girl on the cot to glance overhead."

"So the stairs tilt up to the top of the archway. Now, who could 'a' put those in, and when?"

The squire and Lyman came down in the cubby.

"What's this tall hole that's chopped in the
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corner?" demanded the caretaker, crossing toward it.

"That's where Uncle Amos's gone, I guess. That's prob'ly the passage that leads down to the tool shed."

"Look!" exclaimed Seba Fowler. "See what's under this pillow."

They thought he meant the barrow iron, and Jimmy opened his mouth to protest. Instead young Fowler was holding up a garment.

"It was wrapped round this pair o' woman's slippers," he declared. "You can see for yourselves."

"Lemme take your flashlight, Battles," requested the squire. And when the lad had handed it over he cried: "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! This—this wrap and slippers fit the description o' what Mary Harmon wore when last seen alive! Silk kimono thing! Covered with blue flowers! Now, how'd that get up *here?*"

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"But what's become of Uncle Amos?" Jimmy cried frantically. "I'm going down after him, inside these walls."

"Look out you don't get hurt," warned the squire. "Watch where you put your feet, every step o' the way."

"The rest of you stay up here till I've got to the bottom. This woodwork looks flimsy. More than my weight may break it down."

Pointing the flashlight into the pit, Jimmy soon descended to a junction of the lower floor sills and foundation. There the stairs stopped.

A well yawned.

Protruding from this shaft was a ladder.

This ladder must have been inserted there before the superstructure of the stairs was reared overhead, else it never could have come there on account of the angles made by the walls.

It took courage to lower oneself down that well. Yet, befouling himself with cobwebs

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and filth, the boy followed where his uncle must have gone before him. The flashlight revealed the feet of the ladder planted in cobwebs so thick the ray could not penetrate them. Yet Sheriff Crumpett had not fallen to the bottom or he would have disturbed them.

"Are you all right?" the squire's voice called from above.

"Yes. There's a dry well down here. With a ladder in it. I'm nearly to the bottom. But don't try to come down till you've got ample light."

As Jimmy spoke he arrived at a point which he judged must be under the cellar. He had faced the south in descending the shaft. Now, directly behind him, opening northward, was a yawning hole. He turned the beam into it.

Someone, in past years, had cut a crude tunnel deep down here in the earth. It was oval in shape and walled with rock projections. In places whitened timbers shored up

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the roof or kept the walls from caving inward. Advancing inward cautiously, Jimmy was compelled to step around these oblique supports.

"It goes to the tool house, and no mistake," he muttered aloud. At once he understood why his uncle might not have answered his shoutings; the close, tomblike confines of this tunnel muffled all sounds with a curious deadness.

Ten feet, twenty, thirty, Jimmy advanced as he stepped around timbers. At one point the gravel had caved in and spilled down till barely enough room was left to squeeze through. By chance his light turned on this loose earth, picked out the impress of foot-treads—several of them—of different sizes. He made out a man's big boot mark plainly, but whether his uncle's or not must later be revealed.

"Uncle Amos!" he called once, thinking the sheriff might be somewhere ahead. But

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the acoustics of the warren killed his voice within twenty feet of distance.

It was the craziest, most menacing experience of his life to date, penetrating step by step along the uneven jags of this passage with nothing but a flashlight to show him the way.

The boy seemed to have been exploring down there hours and hours when a sound reached him that stopped him abruptly from further progress. He became as rigid as the timber which he clutched as he blinked off his flashlight.

Distinctly he heard a woman's sobs!

Down there, verily in the "bowels of the earth," something feminine was in distress.

The weeping continued, and Jimmy snapped on his light. Six or seven feet further on the burrow veered slightly to the right. With grit down his neck, clothes smeared with cobwebs and mold, sand in his shoes and the dead miasmatic air of the tunnel distress-

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ing him, the boy reached the twin uprights at the point where the passage turned.

A circular pit was at once disclosed, six feet in diameter and of indefinite height, its floor three feet below the floor of the burrow, which now ended. As the yellow eye of the boy's flashlight gleamed along the burrow the sobbing broke off in a little shriek of terror.

Jimmy reached the edge of the step down into this pit. Squatting on his heels, he played the light on a crouched feminine figure. Back against the opposite wall of the pit she shrank and lifted an arm to screen her sight. It was the second time that night young Battles had seen that gesture.

A TERRIFIED GIRL

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A FANNING of the place with the beam disclosed no signs of Sheriff Crumpett, however. Its only occupant was a terrified girl. A girl and the *thing* on the ground at her feet.

Jimmy spoke first.

"How'd you get down in here?" he demanded.

"I came down the ladder and through the passage—the same way you did, I suppose."

"How long have you been here?"

"Only a few minutes. Though it seems like hours."

"Have you seen anything of my uncle?"

"You mean an elderly man with a lantern?"

"Yes! You've seen him?"

"It was he who trapped me in this frightful place."

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"Trapped you!"

"He pulled up the ladder so I couldn't get out."

"Pulled it *up*!"

For the first time the boy sent his flash beam into the space overhead. Ten or twelve feet above, the ceiling of the pit looked boarded. Those boards were cleated diagonally together to be a door—a barn door.

"He said something about 'being sure' of me. And he jerked the ladder out of my fingers so I couldn't follow him. Look, he hurt my hands!"

She submitted her outstretched palms in proof. Something had bruised them with splinters and dirt.

"It's not like Uncle Amos to act that way. Where's he gone?"

"He was after the man with the glasses who came long the tunnel ahead of him."

So the sheriff had routed out a person hiding in the burrow!

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"And where were you?"

"I was in the tunnel too. And when I saw their lights I hurried ahead of them and pitched down here *right on top of this skeleton!*"

"My uncle was chasing the man with the glasses?"

"Yes, they hardly paid any attention to me. The man got down here into the pit first and scrambled up the ladder. The older man with the lantern got in here too, just as the first was pushing the cover off the top of this place. The first man tried to pull the ladder out, to keep the other from following. But your uncle, as you call him, had already grasped the bottom of the ladder. When the first man saw that a struggle was useless he fled—I don't know where. And your uncle kept after him."

"But he pulled up the ladder so *you* couldn't get out. Then he must have seen you."

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"Yes, he saw me and said something about making sure of finding me when he returned. He pulled the ladder out, slammed the cover on this horrid hole, and left me here in the dark. Then you came along."

Regardless of the effect on his clothes, which were already so befouled that further dirt could not matter, Jimmy got down to the floor of the pit and leaned back against the tunnel aperture. He stared now at the grim exhibit near the girl's knees.

A bogle-eyed skeleton was lying there, grinning in eternal satire straight overhead.

A frumpy dress of wrinkled, besmirched material, old rose or garnet in color, covered the shapely figure of the woman who followed his gaze. It had leg-o'-mutton sleeves puffing out ludicrously at either shoulder and whale-bone stays binding the waist. She was hatless, but her hair was loosened.

"What bones are those?" the boy demanded

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nervously. "And who was the man my uncle was chasing?"

"To both your questions, I'm sure I don't know."

"Are you Mary Harmon?"

In lieu of a handkerchief, the girl had been sobbing in the folds of her skirt. Smearing the tears and grime from her face, she seemed to wince at Jimmy's question. He was holding the flash beam so that it reflected from the gravel in front of her. He saw her bite her lips—cruelly—as though for poise. Finally she parried:

"I wish you wouldn't ask me that."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't answer that truthfully without a long and complicated explanation that involves others. And I haven't the right."

"Is the man my uncle is after one of those others?"

"No, that man is a stranger. What he's

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doing in this affair I haven't the slightest idea."

"Do you know a stranger was murdered in the Harmon house tonight after I left you to help that fellow on the stairs?"

"*Murdered!*"

"You mean you don't know it?"

"Who—has—been—murdered?"

"Someone with letters in his pockets addressed to Joseph Brisk. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Joseph Brisk!"

"Dr. Chapin, who recalls meeting him at the Harmons' years ago, claims he's Josef Briskow—once mixed up in Mary Harmon's disappearance. What do you know about that?"

"Count Joseph Briskow is *dead?*"

"Dead as King Tut. I've seen him myself. Right at this moment he's on his way into Paris in the basket of an undertaker's wagon."

The girl considered this, her eyes narrow-

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ing for the first time since Jimmy had come upon her.

"How was he killed?"

"His skull was cracked with an iron bar. It was found, by the way, in your bed. I found it myself."

"What are you telling me? Who could have done such a thing?"

"My uncle prob'ly left you marooned down in here thinking *you* had as much hand in it as anyone."

"I murdered someone!"

"I left you to go to the aid of that fellow on the landing. When I got back upstairs the cupola flight had been lowered into place. Did you do that?"

"No," she said finally, weighing her words, "Mr. Brisk did it."

"You know him, then?"

"I knew him as Count Briskow but it's all the same."

"Where did he appear from?"

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"The tall, narrow aperture in the corner—that both of us used to get down here. He came up the ladder and stairs from the passage. He crossed the tower room to raise the flight and pass out into the hall. I think he must have raised it at the exact instant the man on the outside was fumbling and knocking around it to see how it worked. And the man on the outside was so startled at having the flight lifted from within that he retreated and plunged down those other stairs to the landing."

"How do you know all that if you were unconscious on the cot at the time?"

"I haven't said I was unconscious."

"You acted sort of dazed and startled when I turned that beam of light in your eyes."

"Perhaps I was more terrified than you suppose."

"Terrified by what—by whom?"

"By Count Briskow. Perhaps he was the

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last person I expected to have appear in those moments, especially from the quarter he did."

"Did he see you on the cot?"

"No, not at first. At least he didn't pay any attention to me. He was too interested just then in finding out who was exploring that upper hall. Then you entered the scene. I didn't know at first who you might be. So I lay back as though asleep and waited to see what you would do."

"How long had you been lying on that cot?"

"I wish—you wouldn't—ask me *that*—now."

"Well, what became of Briskow when I appeared?"

"He must have heard you coming or seen your flashlight, for he came hurrying back from the upper hall, passed through the compartment and stepped into the aperture between the partitions."

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"He was there while I was conversing with you?"

"I suppose so."

"Did you hear me stamping on the stairs and calling to you after I returned from downstairs?"

"Yes," the girl admitted—not without some thought.

"Why didn't you reply?"

"The count wouldn't let me. He warned me to keep quiet."

"Who lowered the stairs back in place?"

"He did. And bolted them. There's a bolt on both sides. He said for me to put on the dress he'd brought—this dress—and follow him or it would be the worse for me."

"So that's where you got that funny-looking frock!"

"The count said," continued the girl, "that he'd wait between the partitions while I got from the bed and into the frock. He said for me to leave my kimono and slippers under

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the pillow, and make up the cot as though it hadn't been occupied. I was grateful for the dress, at any rate, with so many unexpected people poking around the house at the moment. I thought I'd better get into it while I had the chance."

"Then you were spoofing me when you asked who lighted the blue lamp on the box. You knew all along!"

The girl dropped her eyes for a moment. "I haven't said so," she retorted.

"Well, what happened after you got dressed?"

"You came back upstairs, and we knew from the sounds that you were trying to get under the stairs. You went in the chambers on each side and then up the flight toward the cupola. After a time we thought you'd returned downstairs. When the lower door closed, we were sure of it. But a little while afterward we heard another sound as of someone leaving, and we weren't so sure. The

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count declared he would raise the stairs, go down and make certain."

"And did he?"

"Yes. Count Briskow said that if the house was empty of intruders we might be saved the ordeal of using the partitions and tunnel as exit; we could leave the house as you had. He told me to stay in the tower and make no noise."

"Did he threaten you?"

"Yes, he threatened me. He said he'd kill me and leave me there in that secret room if I didn't obey him."

"Was he armed?"

"Yes, he had a revolver ready to do it."

"A revolver! That's funny. There was no gun on him when his body was found."

"I don't know anything about that."

"And you stayed in the tower until his return?"

"I stayed there until I heard other noises down between the partitions. Someone was

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coming up—two people—because I heard their voices indistinctly. I didn't know who they might be and didn't propose to be caught by more strangers."

"What did you do?"

The girl hesitated. Then Jimmy saw a proud tilting of her head.

"I didn't know whether they were assistants of Count Briskow—people who might do me harm—or persons who might help. I had to hide somewhere quickly. I didn't dare flee into the upper hall—I might meet the count and be shot. So I—I—*crawled under the cot!*"

Her face flushed crimson with mortification.

"Well, supposing you did? You needn't feel ashamed of it. Then what happened? Those people climbed up to the cubby?"

"Yes, a man and a woman. I don't know how the woman ever managed it. But she did. I couldn't see their faces, however. Just their feet and legs."

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"And what did they say when they gained the cubby?"

"He cried: 'Ha, the cot's empty, and the stairs are raised!' And, thinking whoever might have been on the cot had made his escape by the opening into the hall, they hurried through it. That's the last I saw of them.

"I realized there must be some way of escape down between the partitions. Count Briskow had appeared from that tall, ragged hole. That second man and woman had likewise gained access to the place by coming up that way. So, to flee while the chance was open, I finally edged into the hole, found the stairs, started down—"

"In the dark?"

Again the girl nodded. "I felt every inch of the way by groping. I give you my word it's taken me all of the time since to travel this far. Over and over I thought from the feel of the timbers that I was trapped. But I always found a way around them. Then I

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finally spilled in this pit, right on these horrid bones. Perhaps I fainted with fright when I found my hand on a skull. Anyhow, the next thing I knew, the man with the glasses was clawing along through the passage and someone with a lantern was after him. What happened after that I've already told."

"You've no idea where the old lady went?"

"*Old* lady! Was she old?"

"She was if she's the one who's been toting the blue lamp around the Harmon house nights. Have you any idea who *she* might be?"

The girl never answered.

A sudden interruption came in the form of noise and movement up around the "ceiling." The boards were lifted after two ineffectual attempts. Jimmy's light beam picked out the forms and faces peering down even as another flashlight from above lighted the girl and himself in the pit.

"For Heaven's sake!" cried Squire Butterworth's voice. Dr. Chapin and the two Pump-

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ton boys, with Paul Lyman just behind, knelt about the brink of the hole.

"Where are you?" Jimmy demanded, startled as much by their familiar faces as though they had been strangers.

"In the tool shed," Butterworth answered. "We lifted the door that was buried in leaves. What are you doing down there?"

"I followed the passage clear to its end. It comes out in this pit."

"Who's that with you?"

"It's the lady I told you of finding in the campanile room tonight. My uncle—"

"Yes, where is your uncle?"

"All we know is he got to the end of the passage too. He was chasing the man with the thick-lensed glasses when he came on this lady fallen in this well. He left her here and pulled up the ladder so she couldn't escape until he returned. If the ladder's up there anywhere, for gosh sakes lower it down."

The Pumptons were lowering the ladder.

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"What's that skeleton?" the squire cried next.

"I don't know. This lady says she fell out of the end of the passage right on top of it. She smashed it apart and later fainted."

Jimmy prodded the lower points of the ladder firmly on the bottom. The portly Chapin descended, fumbling for each rung like a finicky old lady.

When he took Jimmy's flashlight, however, he did not turn to the bones at once. He lighted up the unknown girl, who still remained seated.

"Christmas!" he exclaimed, nearly dropping the lamp.

The girl, cornered, trapped, unable to hide her face from the small crowd of persons—one of whom was confronting her in any direction she looked—returned the physician's stare with sudden defiance. But her voice was ragged as she requested:

"Please don't point that light in my eyes."

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"Ain't you—good Lord!—*you're Mary Harmon!*"

"Am I?" Her lip curled in satire, or at least Jimmy thought so.

"But you ain't a day older than when I see you last—that night I stayed to your house for supper!"

"I asked you please not to point that light in my eyes."

The squire came down. Paul Lyman. The elder Pumpton.

"You boys go back up to the top," ordered the lawyer. "This place ain't big enough for all of us."

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BUT the squire was equally saucer-eyed, staring at the girl. Chapin turned from her to squat by the bones in a daze. But immediately his professional interest overcame abstract stupefaction.

"This is a woman's skeleton!" he cried.

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Butterworth.

"What's more, it wasn't broke to pieces this way by no one fallin' on it. It was brought here busted and laid out this way to make it appear—"

"How can you tell?"

"They've got a left arm and hand on a right shoulder." And the doctor launched into a brief description of ossiferous construction which no one heard, much less understood.

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"Are you Mary Harmon?" cried the pop-eyed lawyer.

The girl once again seemed to have recovered her composure.

"You ought to know," she answered. Her voice held more irony. "We did enough business a few weeks ago, didn't we? You recall my visit to your office in regard to having Mr. Wrightson look after things?"

The squire's vitals somersaulted. He well remembered such a visit.

"Weeks!" he exploded. "*That was twenty years ago!*"

The girl was silent a moment.

"Twenty what?" she demanded.

"Great Cæsar's ghost! Have you been twenty years shut up in this house? What's kept you alive? *And why ain't you grown old?*"

The girl made no attempt to explain. She merely locked glances with Butterworth. The

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knot of men gazed down on her as though she were some strange biological exhibit.

"What you sittin' on that damp earth for?" the squire next demanded. "Can't you stand up? Has the strength left your legs?"

"I'm afraid I twisted my ankle when I fell on these bones in the dark. So long as I keep quiet this way, it doesn't pain me."

"Let's all get out o' here. Better leave these bones lie here for the present, Ansell. Crumpett may want to examine 'em. We'll lift you up, miss. You, Pumpton, reach down as far as you can and help us with this lady who's got a sprained ankle."

The clean, cold mountain air struck to Jimmy's marrow. He drowned his lungs with it, however. Air never had smelled so fragrant. He felt the relief of escaping from a pest house.

His face and clothes were bedaubed with filth; his hat was battered and frowsy with cobwebs; the palms of his hands were

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chocolate-brown. He wanted to quit the Fork, find a place where he could wash and brush himself, get a report of the whole bizarre experience into Boston. Yet three facts of importance should first be determined:

Was the girl he had found actually the long-missing Mary Harmon, and if so what unscientific abiosis had dropped twenty years from her life like a span of night's sleep?

What arrangements would be made for her now that she had been rescued? Where would she go, and what would she do?

What had become of his uncle, and was the pursuit of Briskow's murderer developing features that should also be included in Jimmy's story?

The girl, on emerging from the tool shed, shivered in the chill. She limped painfully, supported between Paul Lyman and Fred Pumpton. Some sort of wrap should be procured for her, Jimmy realized, for, excepting the ludicrous frock, she was almost nude.

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"There's a blanket on the back seat of our car," Fred told Lyman. "You hold her steady, and I'll go get it. It'll keep her warm till we get her to our house. Then Ma can fit her out with whatever she needs."

"Is there a train down to Boston tonight?" asked the girl. She seemed to resent such impersonal reference to her, as though she were one of Fred Pumpton's colts.

"Last train to Boston tonight was the Flyer," answered Paul. "It pulled out of Paris at a quarter to twelve."

"But what time is it now?"

"Twenty minutes to one."

"How far is your home?" the girl asked Pumpton. "Can I call my lawyer in Boston from there?"

"What lawyer in Boston?" the squire asked, coming up.

"His name is Hubbard—Mr. Ajax Hubbard."

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"My dear young lady, Ajax Hubbard has been dead these nineteen years."

"Are you joking?"

"Do I act as if I'm joking?"

"What—has happened—to me?"

"That's what we'd all like to know. And you'd better give up the idea of communicating with Boston till morning—until Sheriff Crumpett has had a little talk with you."

"You don't mean I'm arrested?"

"No, but you can see that, with a murder on the stocks tonight, you're a mighty important witness we can't lose sight of."

"If I'm held as a witness to murder—which I certainly didn't witness—I propose to have an attorney."

"I'll act as all the attorney you need for the present. Seems to me the better thing to do is to drive to Pumpton's, get warmed through, have Fred's mother fit you with some clothes, as he says, and then come along into

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Paris to my house. My wife'll see to you till we get some things explained."

"You haven't any right to hold me here against my will!"

"Oh, yes, we have, Miss Harmon—if that's really your name. With a man killed, this is serious business."

Dr. Chapin pulled Battles and the squire aside as Jim Pumpton carried the girl to the car in the blanket his brother had brought.

"Jabez," he said, low-voiced, "there's something *queer* about all this."

"You bet!" the squire answered. "What's more, I mean to find out what it is."

"Somethin's lackin' in her character somehow that seems to me I remember Mary Harmon havin'. I can't quite explain it. This girl's classy enough in her way. But the Harmon girl had quality where this one only seems to have poise. I grant you she looks enough like Mary Harmon to be her twin sister. And she certainly seems to know a lot

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about Mary Harmon's affairs. But 'tain't medical that Mary Harmon could sleep twenty years."

"I've got reason to believe, however," Jimmy commented, "that whatever her identity or game is, she's not working in league with Briskow and the others."

"What reason?" snapped Butterworth.

Briefly Jimmy rehearsed the girl's story.

"Unless she's damned clever, I'll soon trip her up on whether or not she's Mary Harmon," growled the squire, "when I get her to my house. Looks to me, from what I've learned of the happenin's here to the present, there's been a good-sized plot to get illegal possession of the Harmon fortune, as Jimmy Battles said. And I'll wager a doughnut that girl's a part of it."

"As a victim, perhaps," Battles qualified.

"Huh? Victim? Fiddlesticks! Take a woman to act out a rôle like that. But we'll

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show her we ain't the hick fossils she thinks we are."

"You're overlooking her account of Briskow's behavior before he was murdered—the way he threatened her."

"That's what *she* says. But how do you know she told you the truth?"

"I've got a hunch," the boy replied doggedly.

"Oh—you've got a hunch. Well, hunches don't stand in a court o' law. She's accessory to murder, and, by gum, she'll tell the *facts*—"

"Remember, Mr. Butterworth, there are people in this plot we haven't yet identified or met. There's this fellow Walter, who sent Briskow the telegram. There's the man with the spectacles I hope my uncle is after right now. And then the old lady—by the way, Squire, she's not been accounted for yet to-night. You realize that, don't you?"

"What do you mean, accounted for?"

"The man with the spectacles, whose flight

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seems to mark him as the killer, came into this house through the passage with the old lady that Gleason saw when this case first opened. The girl confirmed it before you found us in that pit. Uncle Amos prob'ly saw the opening in the wall, and the stairs, and explored where they led. The spectacled man was hiding below, at least he hadn't quit the premises when my uncle chased him out. And I can swear the old lady wasn't in the passage when I went through it. Well, what became of her?"

"She's had all kinds of chances to get out of the house while we've been monkey-foolin' with that tower room. Don't seem to me there's any use hunting through that rotted house again tonight—"

"*Hark!*" exclaimed Frank Fowler a little distance away. "Somebody's comin'!"

They turned abruptly and stared up the hill. The moldy moon barely supplied enough light to show the silhouettes of spruces speary

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against the northern heavens. But audible now were the heavy footfalls, the crash of branches, the effort of labored breathing.

Someone was coming down through the trees.

HAWKINS

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HELLO, up there!" called the squire.
"Who is it?"

"It's me, by heck!" responded a voice that brought everyone relief.

Behind the tool shed's gable reared Sheriff Crumpett's doughty figure. He slid down to the yard.

"Where the devil have you been?"

"Chasin' that little flat-footed cuss who killed th' duke. Kept on his trail 'way 'round th' east o' Jake Gleason's pasture. But he got away by wadin' th' swamp. Where's that girl?"

"Pumpton's took her to the car. Where's your lantern?"

"Dropped it, an' it went out on me, somewheres up in th' brush. What you doin' with her?"

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"Takin' her to Pump-ton's to get some decent clothes. Then I'm havin' her into the village to my house."

"Good work! Keep your eye on her till we've got th' truth behind all this cut-up. Come along, Jimmy, if you want t' see some action."

"Where are you going?"

"Goin'! What th' devil d' you think I come 'way back here for? T' get th' car an' chase him, o' course. He left a horse an' rig tied up by Fawcett's ol' cellar hole—that much I've found out—an' made for it. He circled round, got t' it, an' rattled off in th' night. I heard him plain as I ever heard anything."

"Rattled off where?" the squire demanded.

"Well, he didn't climb th' hill past Gleason's or I'd seen him. Which means he took th' swamp road toward Cobb City. Come on, son."

Jimmy forgot his dilapidation, his fatigue, the important story that must be sent to Bos-

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ton. Not till he had entered the front seat of the car behind his uncle did he recall the competition Paul Lyman represented.

"Uncle Amos, make that kid reporter come with us! He'll get into Paris and spill everything."

"Climb in th' back, Paul," the uncle ordered. "You're in on this."

"But I dont want to be in on it. I want to get back to Paris and wire the A. P."

"*Climb in th' back!*" roared the officer above the whine of his starter.

Young Lyman climbed in.

Sheriff Crumpett was ungainly—clumsy with the steering wheel, awkward with his feet.

"Uncle Amos—*be careful!* Won't you let me drive?" And Jimmy grasped the windshield as all four wheels left the ground in a leap.

"You keep a sharp lookout. A hoss, even

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gallopin', can't do more'n fifteen miles an hour—not hitched t' a rig."

"But all these side roads! He might have turned off on a dozen we've passed."

"I know what he's aimin' at, providin' he's ont' th' lay o' th' country. He's makin' f'r th' crossroad 'tween Cobb City an' Wickford."

On and on the car clattered.

At last the engine gave three ragged explosions and a backfire. They rolled to a halt and stopped in soft sand.

"Gawd!" gasped Crumpett. "Fine place t' run out o' gas—three mile fr'm nowhere!"

"Worse'n a blow-out!" Jimmy exclaimed "We might *fix* a blow-out."

"Dammit!" swore Crumpett. "Ain't even a place t' back out o' th' road."

"S'pose they'd have gas in that last house we passed?"

"That's Joe Prescott's place. He don't own no car."

HAWKINS

"Is this highway much traveled? Will a car come along?"

"Not till after sunup. What I can't understand: why ain't we overtook him in th' distance we've chased him?"

"You're sure he took this road in the beginning?"

"Only road he *could* take. You've seen f'r yourselves there ain't been no branch forks that amount t' anything."

"Perhaps he saw our headlights, suspected we were after him, turned in somewhere and hid till we passed."

"But in that case," argued Paul, "believing we've gone on, he might drive out of hiding and now be in our rear. He wouldn't head about and drive into Paris. He'd know the town would be boiling about the murder."

"If he's making for Cobb City, or Wickford, with the idea of catching a train there by daylight, he's bound to come along. You'd

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better turn those lights out. If he sees a car stalled here, he may hide again."

The Sheriff snapped off the switch.

"Lyman," he ordered finally, "you set there in th' car in case anyone comes along from th' front. Jimmy an' me'll go back along th' road."

The reporter was rueful. Yet Crumpett's word was law.

"You an' me'll walk back toward Prescott's, Jimmy. Can't be more'n a mile. Joe's got a phone, at any rate, an' I'll warn all deputies an' constables t' turn out an' round that feller up. An' we'll phone f'r a car t' come out fr'm town."

Separating after leaving Lyman, each took a side of the highway where the walking was firmest.

"Jimmy! Come over here. This side the road!"

Jimmy hastened over.

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"What's that big white thing, this side the bridge?"

"It's a horse!" cried the boy. "A white horse!"

"Eatin' th' road brush. Queer we didn't see it when we passed here before."

"It's hitched to a buggy that seems to be empty!"

"Creep up on it soft like. We don't want t' frighten it."

This horse, however, showed no signs of fright.

"This horse has been running, Uncle Amos. Look at it steam. Do you suppose our man saw our tail light ahead, sensed that he was trapped, and took to the bushes?"

"What else can we think? But where th' devil was it we passed him?"

"He might have hidden in a thousand places. We never would have seen him at the speed we were going."

"Well, he's chose a bad stretch t' abandon

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his rig. There's nothin' but woods fr'm here t' th' back o' Cogswell's. That's th' first farm over th' town line. If he's a stranger t' these parts—don't know th' woods—"

From over the hill on the east the sudden bark of a gunshot had sounded.

"That was near at hand!" exclaimed the nephew.

"Come on!" the uncle ordered. "We'll make for that hilltop."

They pushed through the alders, climbed the crazy fence, wove up through a berry pasture that stretched up the grade. It took them five minutes to get to the summit.

On the eastern side the tree line was visible.

"Helloo-oo-oo!" the sheriff bellowed.

"Hello!" an answer was returned at once. "*Help!*"

"Gosh, what's happened? Where'd that answer come fr'm?"

"Off there to the left, it sounded like."

The pair started forward, running now.

HAWKINS

"Hello!" called the sheriff again, puffing with his effort.

"Hello, hello! Over here beyond the wall. *I've shot a man!*"

Jimmy and his uncle arrived at the wall. Beyond it was a man—a tall man in a coon skin hat, mackinaw, trousers tucked into brogans.

They approached the frantic hunter, who retreated before them.

"He's over here in the birches. I thought he was an animal."

"That you, Joe Prescott?"

"Yeah. Anyhow, he was trespassin' on my land—"

"You been huntin'?"

"Yeah. I seen signs of a bear over in here, last two or three mornin's. I 'lowed I'd stick it out here one night an' see if I couldn't land him—"

"With a shotgun?"

"It's th' only gun I got. But I'd loaded it

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with slugs. An' just as I was about to call it off an' go home something come thrashin' through th' bushes. I give him one barrel an' almost give him t' other when he let out a yell, an' I knowed I'd shot a man—"

"I hope it's our murderer."

"Murderer!"

"What you s'pose I happen t' be out here f'r, at this hour o' th' mornin'?"

In soft pasture grass a man lay on his side. He was alternately moaning and sobbing, doubled like a jackknife.

Crumpett lit a match.

The victim started to cackle an incoherent monologue. He lifted his face.

"Gosh!" cried the officer. "Wrightson!"

"Wrightson?" echoed Jimmy.

"Th' cripple I found t' th' Harmon house after Mary disappeared, twenty years back. I'd know him anywheres. *But he's lost his hump!*"

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"Ain't you Wrightson?" the sheriff demanded of the stricken one.

"Wrightson? Yes, that was the name I went by, once."

"You were at th' Harmon house t'night, warn't you?"

"Yes, yes. I was there."

"An' killed a man before you left?"

"He would have killed me. But never mind. I'll tell you everything if you'll only do something to stop this pain."

"For once in my life," remarked Crumpey, arising, "I get a lucky break. Jimmy, you hustle back down t' th' road an' get t' Joe's house. Wake up his woman. Tell her t' let you use th' tellyphone. If Chapin's still t' Pump-ton's, have him come over here soon's he can. If you can't get hold o' Chapin, try Dr. Johnson t' Paris. Joe an' I'll follow slower, an' lug this cuss between us."

It took Jimmy a quarter of an hour to reach

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the house and another five minutes to explain to a suspicious woman what had happened.

He had succeeded in locating Chapin at Pumpton's, got him started for Prescott's in the Pumpton car, and put in his Boston call, when his uncle and the hunter bore their burden into the yard.

Wrightson had fainted on the journey down the hill. But he revived in the bed.

A soft-nosed slug had entered his body from the side, about four inches below his heart, tearing an ugly hole. Mrs. Prescott brought hot water and towels. But the man's internal bleeding was menacing. The sheriff swabbed the wound with hot compresses.

"Where you been th' last twenty years?" the officer demanded when his prisoner returned to consciousness.

"Up—in the—Canadian—Northwest."

"What fetched you down here now?"

"I read—about the haunt—in a Winnipeg

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paper. I wondered—if Mary Harmon—had really come to life.”

“Whatta you know 'bout Mary Harmon, anyhow?”

“As much as anybody. I left her in that house twenty years ago.”

“You left her there!”

“Yes. There was nothing else I could do. I was afraid they'd get me for murder—or malpractice. We talked it over between us. She said herself—her death—would ruin my career. It was like her not to want to do that. But all the same—it did.”

“F'r Gawd's sake, what are you talkin' about?”

“Don't you understand? I'm Hawkins.”

“You're Hawkins!”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

YES—I'm Hawkins—I'm the man—"Hawkins was drowned by jumpin' off a steamer somewheres round Newfoundland."

"No, I wasn't. I swam around to the log line in the stern of the ship. Hit it by accident. I found it'd bear my weight, and I pulled myself up. All the passengers was round to the side of the boat, watching the search. I climbed back on deck and hid in the storeroom. Later that night I got into the hold. When we reached Liverpool I managed to get away. Briskow never saw me. He thought I was dead. Well, I let him think so. It was just what I wanted."

The stupefied sheriff pulled a chair to the bed. Jimmy and the Prescotts leaned over the footboard.

"Th' newspapers all said, at th' time Mary

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Harmon vanished, that Hawkins was a *young* medical student—”

“Well, I was young. I was only thirty-two.”

“You weren’t young th’ day I faced you at that house an’ you claimed you was th’ caretaker. You didn’t look a whole lot different then than you do at present.”

“Don’t you understand?” the captive protested weakly. “It was just a disguise I fixed up, so no one would know me. I whitened my hair, cut off my eyebrows, and put on a pair of glasses—the same as I had to wear later anyhow.”

“That hump on your back—was that bogus too?”

“Yes, yes. Of course. Mary had died by that time, or at least the ordinary person would decide so, and I knew what would happen if they caught me with her dead body—”

“Whatta you mean, th’ ordinary person’d decide so?”

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"You read the papers at the time, didn't you? You knew what I was up to when I first met Mary Harmon?"

"Th' papers claimed you was some sort o' scientist."

"I was a medical physicist trying to segregate the germ of encephalitis lethargica. Not much was known about it twenty years ago. If I could find the germ and a serum to counteract it, it would have made me famous—wealthy—"

"What th' hell's enseffy—whatever you called it?"

The man closed his eyes for a moment as though the effort of talking cost valuable strength. Yet his auditors became aware, as the strange confession came out, that telling the twenty-year secret which had plagued his soul afforded him a measure of spiritual relief.

"The disease sometimes called sleeping sickness," he declared. "I had some cultures

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in my laboratory and was engaged in testing them when that damnable Hungarian entered my affairs. I'm not sorry I killed him, sir. I wish to Heaven I'd done it sooner. I know from what's going on in my vitals that I can't recover from this wound. A surgeon can't probe for the bullet without killing me getting it out. So you might as well know the truth."

"Go on. Tell us your side of the story. I went through th' papers I'd saved, an' read th' count's side not three days back."

"I met him in the Boston Public Library one morning, where I'd gone to consult some reference books. I had a volume he wanted. Discovering we were looking up the same subject, we began discussing it. Later we went to lunch together. Then I invited him up to my room. It wasn't till some time after he'd invited me to meet his fiancée that I began to have my suspicions. I knew, and so did he, that the disease sometimes resulted in stupor

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and fatal coma. Being practically unknown it might furnish a deadly expedient for removing anyone inoculated, provided someone wished somebody removed. In his case, Mary Harmon."

"My Lord, why should he want that? He was goin' t' marry Mary Harmon."

"He couldn't marry her. He already had a wife in Hungary, and, being a Catholic, he couldn't divorce her. No, he'd evolved a cleverer plan than that to get possession of the Harmon money. And that's where I fitted in, unwittingly. His pact with me."

"What pact with you?"

"He made a pact with me to finance my experiments. He was to receive four-fifths of the monetary results that might accrue from any discoveries I made, while I got the other fifth and the resultant credit. I was desperately poor, and it came as a godsend. I never suspected that there was only one person

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whom he hoped to see get the disease and reward me for a cure—”

“Mary Harmon?”

“Yes, Mary Harmon. The hellishness of it. Courting that girl, talking of marrying her abroad, giving her a title—and all that. All he meant to give her was encephalitis and then blackmail her, through me, for a cure. Of course, in that way, not a shred of suspicion could fall on himself even if she died. If things went wrong, I’d be the culprit. If his scheme worked, I couldn’t protest without incriminating myself.”

“It’s certainly a wild idea. But I see how it might ‘a’ worked.”

“You’ve had the evidence of its truth, haven’t you? In due time I met Miss Harmon, since using me to pull his criminal chestnuts out of the fire was the crux of his strategy. To Briskow’s discomfort, Miss Harmon began taking a keen personal interest in what I was doing. She even offered to equip

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me with a better laboratory for humanitarian reasons. It was like her. She was a thoroughbred."

"All of us 'll subscribe to that. Go on."

"The count began to criticize her interest in me, sensing a weakening of his own suit. He finally saw that she was sufficiently inveigled by my work to proceed with his diabolical scheme regardless of whether or not I found an antitoxin for that bacillus. So came the dinner."

"He poisoned her?"

"He infected her with the bacillus, at any rate. I never could prove my own innocence in the matter, which accounts for what I did later. Poor fool, I never suspected what it was all about. I took him for my friend. A caterer served the meal. Just before we sat down to it he went into the hall, claiming he'd left a bottle of wine in his coat. There was a door opening from the hall into the room I used as my laboratory. Later I missed a whole test

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tube of serum filled with what I hoped was encephalitis cultures—as deadly a vial of germs as ever got into America.”

“But th’ wine she drunk was analyzed afterward!”

“That’s where the authorities went astray, not knowing exactly what afflicted the girl. There never was anything the matter with that wine, although it did aggravate hæmætemesis—”

“Ham—what?”

“I didn’t know until Miss Harmon and I had arrived in Vermont that she was a chronic sufferer from ulcers of the stomach—”

“She come up t’ th’ Fork with you?”

“Yes,” replied Hawkins, alias Wrightson, his face acquiring a weird slate color as he strove to complete a connected tale before lapsing into a second coma. “I’ll come to that presently. The bacteria must have gained access to the blood stream owing to her gas-

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tric condition, which the induction of alcoholic wine inflamed."

"Then how did he get her t' swallow them bugs?"

"I'd been cultivating the bacillus in a bouillon aspic. And cold sliced chicken loaf was on the menu served by the caterer. I'm persuaded that while the dinner was being served that blackguard got my aspic onto her plate. At any rate, the wine soon produced hæmatemesis with nausea, and the girl was removed to her home. Debility began to set in. She had strange sinking spells. And when I missed a vial of my aspic, after I was alone once more, it dawned on me what might have occurred. When I next saw Briskow and accused him of it, I knew in an instant from his behavior that my fears were correct. By the following afternoon I grasped the heinous ramifications of the plot in which I was involved. I had been seen in the count's company, however. His interest in my work was

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known among Miss Harmon's immediate friends. I didn't have a proof in the world that I wasn't a deliberate co-partner with him in the business. And then—Miss Harmon—sent for me."

"Th' night she disappeared, you're talkin' about?"

"Yes. The count had been to her that afternoon and hinted just enough to her—about some vast sum it would be necessary to pay me to effect her cure—to make her realize she had been marked from the first as the victim of a stupendous blackmail scheme, with her very life forfeit if she failed to pay. I came in answer to her summons, and the three of us had it out. I made a clean breast of everything, and she believed in my innocence. What the papers of the period never discovered was Lawyer Hubbard's presence in the case and the expedient we determined on."

"Plenty o' newspaper fellers suspected Hubbard—"

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"But no one reported his arrival at the Harmon home in Beacon Street that eventful night. Because when Miss Harmon sent for him, Briskow realized the danger he ran and hotfooted it out. Then Miss Harmon and I, while awaiting her lawyer's arrival, faced facts. I probably knew—and still know—more about encephalitis lethargica than any other living person, regardless of the strides made in combating the disease in the past two decades. But at that time I wasn't a registered physician whose word or prestige amounted to much. Certainly I'd never have been allowed to treat Miss Harmon if they took her to a hospital. Even her family physician wouldn't have tolerated my prescribing for her—especially as it would have tipped off what had occurred in my rooms. Well, Lawyer Hubbard arrived, and we talked all that over too. And Miss Harmon had such confidence in me that she was willing to go some-

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where and place herself in my hands unrestrictedly for treatment."

"But I should 'a' thought she'd at least reported th' attack on her health t' th' authorities."

"What proof did any of us have that any attack had been made on her health? You must bear in mind that twenty years ago the specialists capable of treating encephalitis effectively were almost unknown. Ordinary physicians and diagnosticians would waste valuable time probing for a score of toxins and symptoms, and meanwhile those cultures in her system would be growing fatally. And yet she couldn't remain ill there at her home without antagonizing her regular physician. No, we had to take her somewhere that would permit me an unhampered practice on her. And she herself suggested her summer place up here in Vermont."

"An' Hubbard knew of all that?"

"He not only knew, but he concurred in the

decision and assisted in getting the girl away. You mustn't overlook what I told you about Miss Harmon's interest in my experiments prior to the attack on her. When she felt convinced she was in the incipient stages of encephalitis it was like her to grasp the part she could personally play in the success of my work. Hitherto I'd had to experiment with mice. Mice and guinea pigs. Here I had a human being attacked by the malady. It even gave Miss Harmon a sort of satisfaction that she could so sacrifice herself. You'd have had to know her temperament to understand. Her money meant nothing to her. And she had lately lost her father, whom she loved very dearly. If she forfeited her life, it meant only a reunion with old John. So she was not only willing but even eager to come up to the old house in Vermont with me and put herself in my hands."

"But how th' devil did you ever manage that get-away without anyone knowin'?"

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"The very simplicity of it was part of the mystery later. At the time of our decision she hadn't reached the stage where she couldn't move about if she wanted, although in frequent distress from hæmatemesis, as I said."

"Just what's hæmatemesis, anyhow?"

"Internal bleeding of the stomach."

"Oh, yeah, Squire Butterworth's wife's got it. Go ahead. How'd you get Miss Harmon out of her house?"

"Why, she merely arose from her bed, dressed, packed a bag with what she'd probably need, and walked out. It was due to the fact that we encountered no one in particular who recognized her that the case became a mystery."

"But it's queer she'd start for Vermont without tellin' her servants."

"That would have meant advising the authorities where she'd gone—and her own physician—and Count Briskow. It was due as much to not wanting Briskow to know of her

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whereabouts as anything else that she simply slipped from the house and never came back. Anyhow, Hubbard said he'd see to things. And he had his own coachman drive us to my rooms, where I packed everything I wanted to take, and then to the station. Miss Harmon wore a heavy black veil, anyhow. We came up to Vermont that night by sleeping car, and Hubbard hired a livery rig that drove us out to the Fork."

The patient closed his eyes after all this narrative, and for a time those present thought he had fainted. The sheriff's attitude began to change. Men on their deathbeds, as this luckless person appeared to be, indulge in few deceptions. Hawkins' manner of speaking left no doubt about his veracity. And Amos Crumpett suddenly saw in him a victim of diabolical circumstance whose life had been wrecked by a mad endeavor to hide a great wrong.

"Was Mary Harmon livin'—an' in that house—th' day I come out there an' found you

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th' caretaker?" the officer demanded when the victim's eyes opened.

"No," came the answer, husky with weakness. "She'd died the previous night. We'd no sooner gotten her comfortable in the place than she began to develop the more malignant symptoms of encephalitis. The cultures were maturing fast. I worked desperately, trying all that I could to arrest them. Temporarily I succeeded so that once she was able to write Hubbard a letter between her spasms. I understand that letter was found—in a coat I neglected to take with me when I fled—"

"It was my father who found it in a closet," Jimmy interjected, with vague pride. But the man on the bed gave no sign of hearing.

". . . But there was I, with a dead body on my hands, and my presence in the house liable to be discovered and investigated at any moment. Lawyer Hubbard was held down in Boston: the newspaper men were shadowing him, and if he came up to us it would lead to

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discovery. I had to act to protect myself. And the first thing was some sort of disguise. It was easy to whiten my hair with some chemicals I had with me. I cut off my eyebrows and put on a pair of John Harmon's glasses I found on the premises.

"I also thought up the idea of fixing an undervest so it looked as though I was hump-backed. And when you investigated my presence, and Hubbard legitimized my alias, it gave me the opportunity to dispose of Miss Harmon's body. At least to hide it long enough for me to get out of the country without haste attaching suspicion to me."

"And you chucked it down th' pit in th' tool house, eh?"

"I did not! I saw a decent lying place for it in the alcove under the stairs, in the campanile. The upper hallway had only one window at its western end, and when old John Harmon saw how dark the upper hall was, even in broad daylight, he had those stairs

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fixed so that they could be lifted up out of the way. This allowed access to the cupola as it became necessary and yet permitted light from the front window in the campanile to fall into the hall as well as give him a sort of den in the tower.

"But I didn't know how many persons might be aware of those stairs—exactly how they worked—and I wanted them to always appear like regular stairs to any stranger who might pry into the place. So I laid the body in there on a cot I rigged up after I'd moved out the den furnishings. I lowered them in place and fixed a bolt on the inside that wedged them down securely.

"Meantime I'd discovered the space between the walls, that two feet or more between the west wall of the den and the east wall of the southwest front chamber. I knew I might have to stay in the place for quite a spell, to establish an alibi in my new rôle of caretaker, and yet if I was ever trapped in that

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house by suspicious persons, or officers like yourself, I'd want some secret exit by which I could make my escape. You remember I told you I was up there to alter some partitions, cut a door in the northerly chambers, I think. I simply tore out a door casing already existent in order to alibi the noise I might have made fixing that hole in the tower, the rough stairs and ladder that led down to the cellar."

"An' you dug that tunnel?"

"I had to put in my time somehow. I was there several weeks, you recall. But that tunnel was mostly accidental. I discovered when I made my ladder to the ground, inside the partitions, that the cellar didn't run back that far. I miscalculated, somehow, and before I knew it I'd got a burrow dug that was really *underneath* the cellar. Then I saw where I could bring it up in the tool shed—which would answer my purpose still further. All of you thought I was digging a well. I had—to account—for my dirt—somehow. At any

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rate, before I quit those premises I had the passage finished. But no one—ever came—to trap me—and I finally decided to leave—go abroad—Lawyer Hubbard had died of heart failure—”

The man's voice had gradually grown thinner and weaker. He spoke this last in a whisper. His eyelids fluttered.

Sheriff Crumpett finally met Dr. Chapin as the latter entered the kitchen.

“You're too late, Ansell,” he announced. “Your patient's been dead ten minutes!”

OUT OF THE JURISDICTION

CHAPTER TWENTY

WELL," the sheriff commented, "th' mystery's *half* explained, at any rate."

"Half!" echoed Dr. Chapin.

"He lasted long enough t' clear up most o' th' twenty-year-old Harmon mystery, an' let's be thankful f'r that. But all this hocus-pocus about th' old woman Jake saw, an' Briskow's reappearance on th' scene, t' say nothin' o' the girl we bagged t'night, remains t' be solved! Hope I'm as lucky gettin' a break *there*."

The two men had withdrawn to the kitchen. Shut alone in the adjacent dining-room, Jimmy talked over the long-distance wire to Boston. He came out presently his face somewhat wry.

"Newton won't believe me," he announced. "He's city editor. He won't take my word for it that the Harmon case has been solved by

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that dead man's confession. He says it's altogether too fantastic to credit."

"Why didn't you ask me t' talk t' him? Guess he'd take a sheriff's word, wouldn't he?"

"He doesn't doubt that I told him the truth. I mean he won't believe Hawkins, or Wrightson, or whatever his name is. Said it sounded too much like the story of a crank. All he's going to use for the morning paper is the murder—the finding of Briskow's body."

"Well, you've done your stunt, anyhow," the uncle consoled. "Call up th' Paris Garage an' have Will Pease send out his towing car with some gas. We'll go back an' talk with that girl."

"If it's really Hawkins who's dead in there," remarked Dr. Chapin when the sheriff had rehearsed the salient features of the confession, "and his story'll hold water, that's prob'ly Mary Harmon's skeleton in the toolshed pit. But how the deuce did it come there?"

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You say Hawkins stated he left her on the cot."

"Someone lugged the bones down there for good and sufficient reasons," Jimmy contributed as they waited for the gasoline.

"So's th' cot would be clean of 'em f'r another t' lie in, I'd say," opined the uncle. "Did Butterworth take th' girl into Paris?"

"She was dressin' in a side bedroom at Pumpton's when you phoned for me to come in a hurry," answered Chapin.

"Why can't we go back in the Pumpton car that brought the doctor?" Jimmy asked.

"A few minutes won't make much difference. Can't leave my car stuck out there in th' middle o' th' highway. Besides, I may want t' use it this comin' day scourin' th' country f'r that pink-faced blackmailer."

They had almost forgotten Watts in the excitement of more dramatic events. As Jim Pumpton came from the bedroom where he

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had been morbidly inspecting the corpse, the Prescott phone rang.

"Is Sheriff Crumpett still there?" the squire's voice demanded.

"Yes," said Jimmy. "You want him?"

"Tell him we're still to Pumpnton's, but the girl's got away."

"What's that?"

"That girl you found in the pit—she's vamoosed. Ma Pumpnton got her some clothes and left her in the side bedroom while she put 'em on. We waited and waited for her to get finished. Finally, after Chapin'd left, Ma Pumpnton went in to see what was keepin' her. The sash on the meadow side of the house was raised and left open. No girl. She's gone!"

"Damn!" swore the uncle, on taking the receiver and having this intelligence repeated. "That's three of 'em we yet got t' bag—Watts, th' old lady, an' now th' girl.

"You go int' Paris, Jabez. I'll meet you

OUT OF THE JURISDICTION

there just as soon's Pease has fetched out some gas. Run out of it. I'm stuck."

"I can't go into Paris, or anywhere, without a machine. Chapin took th' Pump-ton car t' get out to you."

"That's right, so he did. Well, I'll send him back by way o' th' Fork. Pump-ton'll pick you up an' take you along int' Paris with th' doc."

The sheriff rang off.

"Proves she's a fraud, that girl," he growled.

"Crawled through a window, first opportunity. I see where I got a busy day ahead t'morrer."

"Uncle Amos," declared young Battles, "I want to go back to the Fork with Pump-ton. I've got a hunch."

"What hunch?"

"We haven't accounted for the old lady yet. She entered the Harmon house with Hawkins last night and hasn't been seen since. We know

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she reached the Fork in the Wickford rig, yet Hawkins drove off without her."

"Well?"

"Maybe the girl's escape concerned that old lady. I want to return to the Fork and make sure."

"All right," the sheriff laughed. "Go ahead with Pumpton an' Doc. Soon's Pease comes with my gas I'll follow you over there with Lyman. Ain't scared, be you?"

"I'm certainly not scared by an old lady and a pretty girl."

Hawkins had died at ten minutes after two o'clock. It was twenty minutes to three before the coroner was ready to leave Prescott's. It was a quarter after three before Jimmy's wild ride with his uncle had been retraced and the Pumpton car turned into the Fork.

He had left his flashlight in the sheriff's car, but Prescott had loaned him a lantern. The

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boy still had his automatic in his right-hand coat pocket, however.

"Want I should go in with you?" Jim Pumpton asked.

"No," Jimmy responded. "Uncle Amos will be along between now and daylight. You take the doctor along into Paris, picking up the squire, as my uncle directed."

The reporter alighted and slammed the door. Pumpton accelerated his engine, clacked his gears, veered to the right from the Wickford road and headed west. Jimmy watched the red eye of his tail light grow fainter through the tree tunnel. Then it took the distant grade and was gone. Jimmy turned toward the house.

He skirted the front and went around to the east veranda door, leading into the sitting-room. No one had thought to close it, much less lock it. The boy's lantern cast spookish silhouettes and shadows on the sitting-room

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walls when he finally tiptoed in. He heard sounds of sobbing somewhere above!

And then a hand touched Jimmy: touched his left elbow.

He gave a spring in panic, fumbled the lantern, dropped it with a crash, saw it wink out. A low, tense voice spoke out of the pitch.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

"It's—me."

The girl was somewhere near him. She must have been waiting for him just around the corner of the stairs.

"Gorry, you frightened me! Who's crying upstairs?"

"My—mother."

"You didn't waste any time getting back here from Pumpton's—"

"Oh, I'm so glad *you've* come. I know I can trust you; that you'll help me. I want to get away from here—as far as I can—and take

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Mother with me—before anyone else comes—”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Mary Wilson.”

“Wilson!” Again that name had appeared in this enigma. And Ephraim Watts had addressed the sheriff as “Mr. Wilson.”

“Please, please help us to get away,” the girl begged. “I’ll tell you everything if you will. Mother can’t walk very far. She’s nearly exhausted and chilled to the bone. She got out of the house while all those men were here and hid in those spruces up by the Fork. I never dreamed it was *she* who came in with Dr. Hawkins. Now, with Count Briskow dead—”

“Hawkins is dead too. Did you know that?”

“Good gracious, no!”

“A hunter shot him by mistake over northeast of here, when he abandoned his rig and took to the woods. What’s your mother’s connection with Hawkins?”

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"Please! Don't let's waste time talking about that now. Where can we go that no one will find Mother and question her tonight?"

The boy was conscious of a vibrant feminine personality close to him, almost touching him. Something radiated between them, though they could scarcely see each other, thrilling the lad with a potent ecstasy.

"Wait a minute! Let me think. I have it! Paul Lyman told us he left his car somewhere about here earlier tonight. If I can make the tire hold air, I ought to be able to drive you away."

Jimmy relit his lantern. A girl in a neat turban and a modishly tailored walking suit confronted him—a perfectly wonderful girl with lustrous eyes.

"Are those—the clothes—you got at Mrs. Pumpton's?"

"No, they're my own. I had them hidden in an upstairs closet. Give me the lantern. I'll bring Mother down."

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An elderly lady descended the flight.

She was gaunt of face and high-waisted. She was clothed in a dress of dull black; the only color about her costume was a trim of white ruching that showed at her throat. The fabric was soft, pliable and voluminous; her skirt screened her feet in folds when she walked; a cape of similar material, or rather a type of widow's veiling attached to her bonnet, fell over her shoulders and presented the analogy of a nun's raiment which had puzzled that part of Vermont for a week. Her step, too, explained why she seemed to "float" along that stretch of trees where Gleason had first seen her; despite her height, she took steps queerly short. She did not walk with a stride. She *trundled*.

This emaciated but active matron assayed the lad who held up the lantern.

"My daughter's told me about you, young man. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for helping us. If that blackguard of a

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Briskow is dead at last, all we want to do is get as far away from this district as possible and never hear of it again."

Jimmy forebore to question her. They left through the sitting-room and passed over the veranda. A moment later they were out by the gate.

"You'd better come along up into the spruces with me," declared the reporter. "My uncle's due here any minute, and perhaps it's just as well if he doesn't find us tonight."

The mother hobbled painfully in ascending to the spruces. She had cruelly bruised a knee-cap, Jimmy learned later, following Euclid Hawkins through that subterranean passage. But they gained the trees without anyone's arriving. And Jimmy found the flivver not far from his bag. He started working on the tire.

They heard the sheriff's machine approaching from the north.

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"Hang it!" cried Jimmy. "That means Paul Lyman's with him and will come for his car!"

But it was the sheriff alone. Young Lyman, they later learned, had utilized the Wickford livery rig to drive directly into Paris and file his story.

Crumpett stopped his car across from the gate, went into the residence, and was gone ten minutes. They saw his flashlight upstairs and down. Twice they heard him call the nephew's name. But Jimmy kept silent.

Satisfied at length that the boy was not about the premises, the sheriff emerged, stood several moments ruminating by the gate, climbed into his car, started it, and finally left through the tunnel of trees.

Jimmy started the flivver's engine.

"Where do you want to be driven?" he asked.

"Take us to the tavern in Wickford," responded Mrs. Wilson. "That's where I've

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been staying through all this dreadful business. My bag's there, and I want to get it."

"How far is the New Hampshire line?" demanded Mary.

"About thirty miles east."

"Would you drive us that far? If we cross the state line, we'll be out of the jurisdiction of local authorities. At least they can't seize us without extradition proceedings."

"You seem to know something about law," laughed the boy.

"I ought to," the girl replied. "If I'd worked anywhere but in a law office, I might never have been drawn into this crazy conspiracy in the first place."

FOR WALTER

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ALTHOUGH Wickford was boiling with excitement about the double killings of the night, no one appeared to suspect an elderly woman in widow's weeds, a smartly dressed young woman and an equally open-faced boy, who drove up to the tavern in a car with Vermont license plates as the whistle on the clothespin factory blew for seven o'clock. Mrs. Wilson's bag was procured, her bill settled, and the car turned eastward into the mountains. A few minutes after eight o'clock between Concord, Vt., and Whitefield, N. H., they crossed the Connecticut. They drew into Littleton on the dot of 8:30.

"Well," chuckled Jimmy, "now I'm accessory to murder. Furthermore, I've broken a federal statute, driving a stolen motor car

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from one state to another. Suppose we eat some breakfast before I start for the pen for life."

They entered a white-tiled café with stall-like booths along the left wall. Seated with her mother across a table from him, the girl reached out and gripped Jimmy's clasped hands.

"I think you're just splendid," was her manner of thanking him.

"That—goes—both—ways," the boy said thickly. Then, fearing he would make an ass of himself before this stunning girl, he said at once: "All I want is an explanation of your part in this queer business."

Yet *was* it all he wanted? A flush crept up from his collar. He was not so callow that he failed to read the meaning in her eyes. . . .

"Haven't you guessed—hasn't any solution been suggested to you by my mother's presence in the case?"

"I know you've had some legitimate motive

for substituting for the real Mary Harmon. I've thought so for the past three hours. But—I haven't been able to place this Walter, who moves like a ghost behind all this action—or your mother's connection with Mr. Hawkins."

"I met Mr. Hawkins while staying to the Wickford Tavern—quite by accident," Mrs. Wilson contended. She was faulty of hearing, Jimmy perceived, and had cupped her left ear with her palm—which had prevented her from realizing Jacob Gleason's approach behind her that night a week ago.

"You mean he was a stranger?"

"Yes," answered the mother. "When I learned from the talk I heard round me to Wickford that I'd been took for a spirit, I left off wearing these clothes for a spell—I'd put 'em on, anyway, for the veil that hid my face if I didn't want anyone to see me. I just stayed quiet round the tavern wondering how I'd

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succeed in finding my Mary. And Mr. Hawkins came there—”

“When was this?”

“He got in last night. We ate to the same table and started discussing the Harmon case. I guess he got suspicious from something I said—anyhow, he come up to my room later and asked to talk privately. He asked point-blank if I warn’t the woman who’d been seen about that house. I finally told him I was, and asked him to help me. Then he told me who *he* was, and said he knew of one room that I couldn’t have looked in—and a secret passage he’d show me next night. That meant tonight. So this afternoon we hired a livery rig—”

“You’d never been in the passage before the past night?”

The mother answered negatively, and the reporter believed her.

“How was it you were later seen emerging from the bulkhead dressed in white?”

“The house was so horribly filthy after I

got into it that I pulled a sheet off one o' the beds and wrapped it around me to save my clothes from the dirt and cobwebs."

"Well, how about the blue light? Did you bring that with you?"

"No; I found it after I got into the house—on a shelf in the kitchen. It was the only lamp that had a chimney. But there was oil in it, and I lighted it to see my way round."

"What made you scream after you'd gone into the tool shed—so the Fowlers were so frightened?"

"Well, I'd spent all that blessed night going over that house for signs of my girl. Along toward morning I heard dogs barking somewhere and come down and outdoors to find out why they seemed so close. Then I see the tool shed—if that's what it is. I went in there, the only place I hadn't looked in. When I re-lighted my lamp I saw the place was empty. But I wondered about that door lying in the leaves and lifted it. The first thing I see was a

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skeleton staring up at me. I'm afraid I did screech; that house and hunt had got on my nerves. But it wasn't anything to the scare I got when I heard noises down in the pit and a man appeared from somewhere, down it, with his arms full of more bones—"

"What man?"

"I know from Mary's description later it must 'a' been that Briskow. He looked up as frightened as I was, and disappeared in a hole while I watched. I got out at once and ran up the road to the north. By daylight I was in Wickford. I sent down to the baggage-room in Paris for my grip and stayed to that Wickford hotel as I told you—only going back to that house once or twice after that, nights."

Jimmy turned to the daughter.

"And were you in that dratted ark all the time your mother was hunting for you?"

He did not miss the quick exchange of glances between the two women.

"I'll tell you everything," the girl suddenly

decided. "I deliberately mixed up in all this to smash that foreigner's diabolical conspiracy. It was—the only way I knew—to save—Walter."

"Walter! *Save him!*"

What was the white-hot stab that struck through the young man's heart? Had he suddenly fallen in love with this princess—in one night—with another man in the picture?

The mother seemed to steel herself.

"I'll tell you that," she volunteered. "Mary did it to save her brother. Walter's my son!"

"Your son!"

"I don't know what ails him, sir. But he ain't been the good boy I've tried to raise him to be since his father died. He didn't like to work. He wanted to make big money easy—a lot of it. And when that scoundrel Briskow come along and saw Mary—"

"Where did he see you?" Jimmy demanded of the girl.

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"In Mr. Watts' office," she replied with equal candor. "Mr. Watts was my employer—in Boston. He came from somewhere out West, got admitted to the bar, and tried to build up a practice. But only petty-larceny cases came to him and bill collections and dirty divorces. But he'd bought a set of law books in a second-hand book store: books that twenty years ago belonged to Ajax Hubbard."

"What? I don't see—"

"If you've read the old accounts of the Harmon case you'll remember that Mr. Hubbard died of heart disease. Well, I've put two and two together and decided that the man knew of his malady and was afraid he might be taken without anyone knowing the facts of that disappearance. So he committed the complete story of it to paper. I think he was just finishing it when Count Briskow was announced to see him that day, the afternoon of his fatal attack. He slipped the 'confession' into an open law book that was later replaced

on his shelves and sold with his library. Where those books have been during the intervening time, I haven't the slightest idea. But quite recently, in poring over them, I have reason to believe Mr. Watts found the monograph Lawyer Hubbard had written, realized its significance, and saw a way to make a pretty penny for himself. For it incriminated Count Briskow, who ought to pay to have it destroyed—"

"Did you ever read that monograph?"

"Certainly I read it. That's how I learned about the tower-room and the trick staircase and how to get into it. There's a bolt under the flange of the second stair that has to be shot back before the stairs can be lifted from the hall. But to get back to Count Briskow. Watts traced him through the Hungarian consul in Boston, and the letter he wrote brought the count to America at once. He had a session with Mr. Watts in which he declared the monograph a forgery and threatened to prose-

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cute my employer for blackmail. But all the time he knew it wasn't a forgery. *And it definitely confirmed Mary Harmon's death.*"

"But where did you fit in?"

"He saw me on those visits he paid to Mr. Watts and was struck by what he said was a startling resemblance to Miss Harmon. He followed me from work one night and took me home in a taxi. On the way he proposed a crazy scheme to have me impersonate the heiress, lay claim to the fortune and divide it with him. He started to narrate a lot of details about Miss Harmon and her affairs—which I utilized with you and the man you called the squire tonight to make you confused till I got my bearings and saw a chance to escape from all of you. Remember, however, I didn't make you any direct statements. I didn't lie to you once. I only asked questions—

"But—I made the mistake of telling everything to my brother."

Mrs. Wilson brought out her handkerchief

at reference to the son and furtively wiped her eyes.

“Walter was indignant that I’d passed up such a wonderful chance to make all of us rich. So he hunted up the count and proposed a counterscheme of his own. He knew a fellow in New York—a forger—who’d prepare a fake death and birth certificate. A death certificate for Mary Harmon. A birth certificate for himself—showing wherein Miss Harmon had run away and married Mr. Hawkins, and he was their son and rightfully entitled to her fortune. He had a wild story ready about having learned of his mother’s true identity in Australia—”

“I don’t know which scheme sounds the craziest,” the amazed reporter declared.

“Well, that’s about all. Excepting that when I realized my only brother was dead set on going through with it, I had to do something desperate to balk him. Maybe I acted as crazy as all the rest of them. But it occurred

to me that a way stood open to use my startling resemblance to Hiss Harmon to throw a good scare into both my brother and the count. I'd go up to that house, get into that room and on to that cot bed, *and let some stranger find me*. I'd make that stranger think I might be Mary Harmon aroused from a trance, after all. Then, before any alarm was raised, I'd disappear and always leave them guessing.

"But I really saved my brother in a way I little suspected, although it nearly killed Mother. I resigned my position with Mr. Watts, so he couldn't keep trace of my movements. Then I went to Vermont by way of New York and Springfield. In New York I figured out my time and sent a letter, typewritten of course, to Mr. Watts—whom I'd chosen to be the one to find me because he already knew about the house and the campanile—telling him to investigate the real contents of that chamber before he relied on

the information in his recently discovered monograph.

"I sent it anonymously, of course, and got up to Vermont immediately after. I hadn't told Mother where I'd gone or what I proposed to do. And when I was missed, my brother suddenly got it in his guilty conscience that Count Briskow had done away with me to silence me—to keep me from reporting what he'd proposed in the taxi. And when Mother went to Mr. Watts for information and advice, he showed her my anonymous letter from New York. At once she was sure the letter referred to my murdered body. But she didn't dare go to the police because that might incriminate Walter. She started up there to hunt the place for me herself. And the rest you know."

Jimmy turned to the mother.

"Did you see Mr. Hawkins strike down the count?"

"No," replied the elder woman. "I'd found

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Mary's clothes in that closet where I left my lamp. But I knew Hawkins and Briskow had met because the sound of angry voices reached me. I heard Mr. Hawkins screech something about 'squaring accounts for the wreckage of his life' and then a cry as if someone had been hurt. I lighted the blue lamp, came out, fell over that Briskow's body and fled down the stairs to the landing. I'd dropped the lamp, breaking the chimney and putting it out."

"Where did Hawkins get the bar with which he struck down Briskow?"

"It was the handle of an old wheelbarrow we'd seen as we entered the tool shed. He'd took it along with him in case he had to force the stairs open."

"But Briskow had a revolver, didn't he? Why didn't he use it?"

"I heard something heavy fly into a corner of that upstairs hall. It might 'a' been his revolver. If it's there, it'll doubtless be found."

Jimmy sat a long time staring at the wall.

"Perhaps it's just as well," he declared at last, "that your connection with the affair should never become known."

"I'd—I'd—like to—hug you," Mary Wilson choked. And when Jimmy glanced quickly at her she was biting back tears. . . .

"It's O. K. with me. But not here," he laughed, And felt more than ever his resemblance to an ass.

The waitress brought their breakfast.

Jimmy Battles ate his first meal with the girl that sixty days later he married.

Cassius Quigley never understood why he totally lacked interest in tracking down Ephraim Watts—who was never apprehended—nor why the most brilliant young writer on his Sunday staff subsequently gave up his position and bought a weekly paper of his own in Connecticut. There are some matters that even an enterprising young journalist does not report to his public.

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But all the papers ever related about the case was the murder of an unknown man from New York and the subsequent shooting of the murderer by a hunter. On account of the proximity of the Fork house to Canada, a bootleggers' feud was the general consensus of opinion. And, inasmuch as young Lyman later officiated as Jimmy's best man, collusion may be suspected in suppressing contradiction.

The Eighteenth Amendment has broad, broad shoulders even if narrow persons proposed it.

THE END

THE ILLUSTRIOUS CORPSE

by
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author of
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